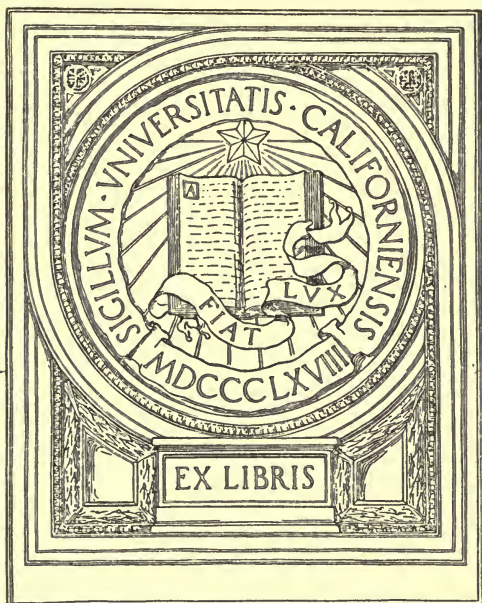




JOE THE BOOK FARMER

GARRARD HARRIS

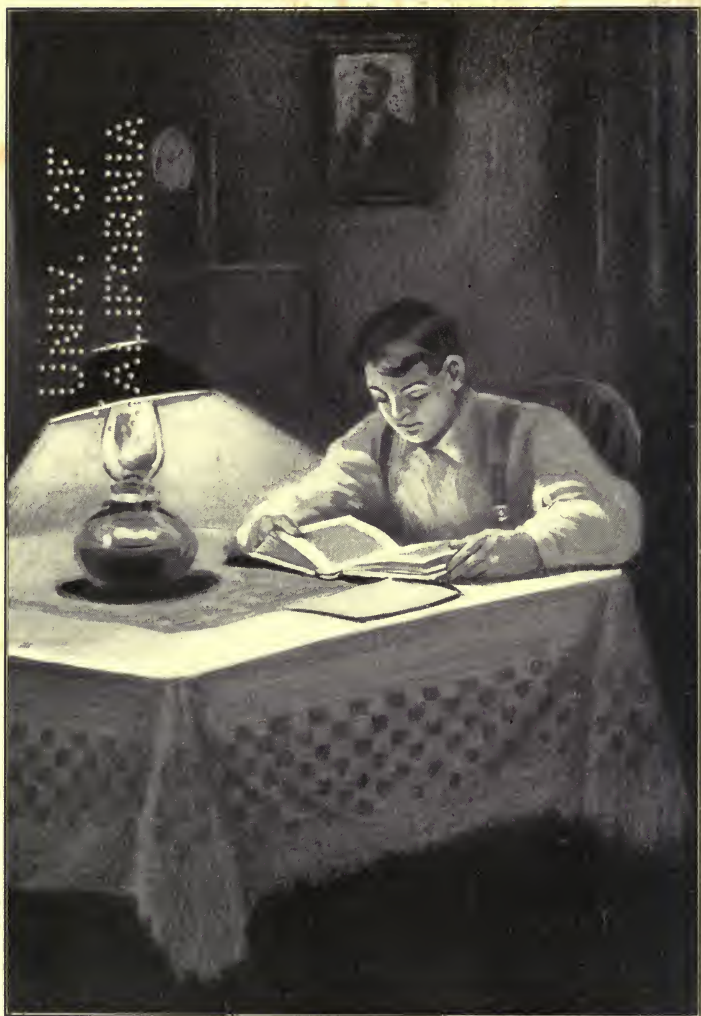


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JOE LOOKED THE MATTER UP IN HIS BOOK THAT NIGHT

JOE

THE BOOK FARMER

MAKING GOOD ON THE LAND

BY
GARRARD HARRIS

ILLUSTRATED



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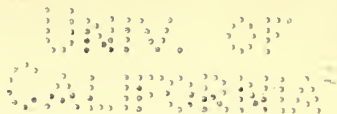
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JOE, THE BOOK FARMER



JOE, THE BOOK FARMER

CHAPTER I

“**A**W, 'tain't no use, a poor man ain't got no chance in this danged country. If I had enough money to move on I'd go to Oklahomy.”

Tom Weston thus delivered himself after taking his year's crop of cotton to town. When he finished “settling up” for the twelve months' advances of provisions, clothing, fertilizer, and feed for his two scrawny horses, with ten per cent. interest on the whole amount, in addition to the three bales of cotton as rent he had to pay for the dilapidated farm he occupied, he was still in debt.

Tom Weston had never owned a foot of land—and he was forty-six years old. His father had never owned a foot of land, and died in debt at the end of a long life, the scant proceeds of his misdirected labors going always to others.

Joe Weston, fourteen years old, had the same

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unhappy prospect stretching down the years for him—a slave in the chains of circumstance, and nothing but toil, always for others. For his portion, existence, and the privilege of toiling.

Joe had come to town with his father on settling-day. He hoped that when Mr. Weston finished with the Somerville Mercantile Company, or the company finished with him, there would be money enough for a pair of real store trousers, and a new hat, and a pair of stout boots with bright copper bands on the toes. For four years now Joe had worked in the fields with his father, and Mr. Weston had promised him the shoes and hat and clothes this year for helping.

In the spring Joe dropped the cotton-seed in the furrow. When it came up he handled a hoe, and helped “chop out” the surplus plants. Then came on the bitter fight with weeds and crab-grass, to give the little cotton stalks a start. The last year Joe had been given a light plow, and he plowed the cotton. Then along in the middle of September he and his mother and little sister Nell helped pick it.

After all the cotton had been picked, ginned, and sold Joe was allowed to go to school, from November until the last of February, for in March the plows were started to going again.

“Why don’t you diversify a bit, Mr. Weston?”

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inquired John Somerville, kindly. "You'd be better off if you did. Instead of planting all cotton, why not try some oats and corn, an acre or so of yam-potatoes, raise a couple of pigs for meat, put in a good garden, and cut your expenses down?"

Then it was that Mr. Weston made the remark about moving to Oklahoma. A shade of impatience flitted over Mr. Somerville's face.

"You're dead wrong there, Tom. There's more in the man than there is in the land. The trouble is with you, Tom, not the country or the land. You are just too lazy to learn improved methods—and you are no different in that respect from thousands of other farmers in this country. You won't learn anything."

"Y-a-a-s, I've hearn a heap about this here 'book-farmin',' but I ain't never seen nobody gettin' rich at it."

"Nobody around here has had sense enough to try it," retorted the merchant.

"If we don't know nothin' about it, how we goin' to start?" inquired Weston, thinking he had Mr. Somerville.

"There's an agent of the United States Department of Agriculture and the State Commissioner of Agriculture over at the courthouse right now for the purpose of conferring with you farmers of this county. I'll bet there are three

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hundred farmers in town to-day, and not twenty-five will have interest enough to go listen to these gentlemen."

"Aw, shucks, what does a little dood from Wash'n'ton or up to the capital know about farmin'? I've done forgot more than they'll ever know."

"There you are, you don't know *what* they know, and you don't want to know. That's the way you pig-headed farmers are."

Weston merely scratched his chin and looked stubborn.

"Go over and see what they've got to say, at any rate," insisted Mr. Somerville.

"Naw, I ain't goin' to waste time on 'em talkin' a lot of fool truck out of books writ by just such sissy farmers as them. I reckon they'll be recommendin' us to tie pink ribbons on our pigs' tails, an' buy feather beds for our hosses an' cows?" He guffawed at what he thought was his wit.

"Well, go around and see. You can laugh at them if they do advise fool things like that."

"Naw, ain't goin' a step. Ain't got time. Jim Sullivan told me he was goin' to get a jug of the real old red-eye on th' noon train, an' me an' him is goin' to drown our sorrer."

"Leave that stuff alone, Tom," said the kind-hearted old merchant, who had known him from

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his boyhood; "that is one reason why you are about down and out now."

"Dad, let me go to the farmers' meeting?"

Both men looked around. Joe had been seated on a sack of beans at the end of the counter and in the shadow of the desk. His father had forgotten him, and Mr. Somerville had not noticed that he was about.

"Ain't got time. Me 'n' Jim Sullivan's goin' to leave as soon as the train gits in," began his father.

"I don't mind walking the five miles home this evening; I do want to go hear those government people, daddy."

"I ain't got no quarter to spend for your dinner, Joe."

"I don't want no dinner."

"That's all right; Joe's going to take dinner with me," interrupted Mr. Somerville.

"Oh, all right then; but you needn't think yer goin' to try any of that foolishness and new-fangled lum-de-dums on my place." There was a streak of stubborn meanness in Tom Weston.

"*My* place, Tom," corrected the older man, gently, "for which you have failed to pay all the rent this year and owe a balance on last year."

"Well, 's long's I got it rented," began Weston.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Tom; I'll just let

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you off one bale rent, and take four acres for Joe and me to experiment on if we want to."

"That's a trade," grinned Weston. "But how about the time he takes fooling with you-all's projects? His time belongs to me." Mr. Somerville looked at him in cold scorn for a moment, then at the eager, bright face of the boy.

"Dad, ain't you *never* goin' to give me a chance? I go 'round dressed in your cast-off clo'es; I work like a nigger, an' now when I want to learn somethin', an' try to make more at farmin' than you have, you don't seem to want to let me." His eyes filled with tears.

"Weston, of course he's your boy, and you have the legal right to his services, but you are making a serious mistake in the position you are taking."

"I'm standin' on my rights!" doggedly responded the other, trying to brave out the scorn he saw in the merchant's face.

Mr. Somerville looked at Joe, who was rather an under-sized, wiry chap with a good head and a square fighting chin.

"Are you in earnest, Joe? Do you really want to study and learn, or are you just talking?"

"Just give me a chance—that's all I want—and I'll show you!" answered Joe.

"Very well, then, Weston; what do you con-

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sider Joe's services worth to you during the crop year?"

"A hundred dollars," answered Weston, at a venture, trying to put the figure high.

"I'll just take you on that. Come on back to the desk and sign up an agreement."

It was done in a few minutes, the document providing that Joe's services were sold to John Somerville for one year from date for one hundred dollars; that said Weston bound himself to interfere in no way with any experimental or planting operations carried on by said boy and J. Somerville, and to turn over four acres fronting on the public road to said boy, and release all rights to any crop the said Joe Weston might make.

"Now, Tom Weston, I think for the last fifteen years I've heard you complain that you 'couldn't get out of debt' and the wonders you would perform if you ever did. According to our books, you owe us a hundred and sixty dollars, part of it three years old. My contract for Joe calls for one hundred dollars. I'm going to do better than that, and pay you a hundred and sixty. I've wiped off the books. You don't owe me a cent."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now, listen! You and Joe are even. I'll bet you a hat that I can take a fourteen-year-old

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boy and on four acres of land farmed like sense and industry and the books say; we will make more profit off these four acres than you will make off the twenty you pretend to cultivate.

“Come on, Joe, the farming firm of Weston & Somerville is now going out to learn something about ‘book-farming’!”

CHAPTER II

MR. SOMERVILLE would have won his bet about the farmers at the agricultural lecture. There were less than twenty-five who had come to hear the experts, but the County Superintendent of Education had managed to corral about twelve boys of various ages in the room.

Joe and Mr. Somerville were interested from the start, for everything the lecturers said was perfectly plain and seemed the essence of practical common sense. At noon the two gentlemen were glad to accept the invitation of Brierfield's largest merchant to go to his home for dinner. Joe was introduced to both of the visitors. They were young men and graduates of agricultural schools. He and the State Superintendent of Agriculture got to be great friends.

"I was a chap just about like you," said the official, "and I didn't have much chance, but I just made up my mind I *would* learn, and the rest was easy."

In the afternoon the president of the Board of Supervisors announced that the board under-

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stood that a "Boys' Corn Club" was to be organized, and he was authorized to say that the board had appropriated a hundred dollars in gold, fifty of which was to be paid to the boy under eighteen years of age who, on a measured acre, produced the greatest yield of corn at the least expense; twenty-five to the next, fifteen to the next, and ten to the next.

"You can just add as prizes from my company a complete outfit of clothes for the first prize—entire suit, hat, shoes, underwear, shirts, collars and ties; a pair of shoes and a hat to all of the next prize-winners." Mr. Somerville's announcement was greeted with applause.

"Mr. Chairman, the Planters' Bank will add fifty in gold, twenty-five to be added to the first prize, five dollars each to the next prizes, and a fifth prize of ten dollars to be created," chimed in the president of the bank, who had followed Mr. Somerville in to see what his best customer was doing at the farmers' meeting.

"Now, there's something else," said the State Commissioner of Agriculture. "The state will give to the winner of every prize a handsomely engraved certificate of merit, bearing the signature of the Governor, myself, and the Secretary of State, with the great seal of the state on it. This is a testimonial you can frame and keep always. And in addition the winner of every

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first prize in each county will have the records gone over in my office, and the winner of the highest record in the state will receive a free trip to Washington.

"An agent of the national Department of Agriculture will collect the boys at various points; they will be taken to the capital as the honored guests of the nation—the champion corn-grower of each state. They will be shown every attention; the President will receive them especially; they will stay a week at the best hotel in the city of Washington, see every interesting sight there, and be brought back home at no expense whatever. This trip would cost anybody else at least three hundred dollars—that is the grand prize for all the boys to strive for."

"The rolls of the Boys' Corn Club of this county are now open to receive members," said the Secretary. Joe marched down to the desk and signed.

"I'm going to have one of those prizes, too," he said, his eyes snapping with determination.

"We must have at least fifty boys in this county," said the Superintendent of Education, "but the sooner they join the better it will be for them, for they can prepare their ground this fall, and that is one of the main things. The lists will remain open until March 1st."

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"I'd be mighty glad if you would give me a list of the books I ought to have," said Joe to the state commissioner, when the meeting adjourned.

"All right, son, here's a list I had prepared. I'll request the Department at Washington to send you their bulletins on the subjects of corn and cotton growing and truck-farming, and whatever the government issues is an authority you can count on."

"Here, just duplicate that order for me, will you? I'm a bit too old to join the Boys' Club, but I'm joining by proxy. Joe is representing himself and me too," laughed Mr. Somerville. "I'm really very much interested."

As Joe and Mr. Somerville went down the street the merchant stepped into a bookstore.

"Let's go in here and get started. I see the first thing on the list is *Elements of Agriculture*—that sounds sensible, like it was a start from the bottom. We'll get two copies; you take yours home, and I'll study mine here."

"Can't start any too soon for me," answered Joe.

"Well, here's the books. Now you come to town next Saturday and spend the day with me, and we'll compare notes on what we've read. When you go home, have your father point out the four acres we are going to cultivate—don't matter whether it is poor or not."

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"I'd rather he'd give us the poorest, meanest land there is on the place. I don't want him coming around afterward saying we had any advantage on the land," said Joe.

"That's right; the poorer the land the bigger our demonstration will be. Get it laid off, and anything that suggests itself to you, why, just go ahead and do it. I'm going to give you a check-book, and when you need to spend any money write out a check for it and sign it 'Weston & Somerville.' I will instruct the bank to pay it."

"All right, sir, but I am not going to spend anything I can possibly help."

"Now, let me tell you something right here; don't ever be afraid to spend money if it is going to pay you to do so. If you can see where a dollar brings a return, spend it quick. The thing to do is to spend wisely; that is investment."

"Well, I think the first thing I want, then, is enough hog-wire fencing for those four acres. Seems to me I've never done anything much except chase hogs out of our fields."

"You are starting right, Joe; that's good sense. I'll send the wire out Thursday and a man to stretch it and put it up. You get the posts ready."

"All right, sir."

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“And after you get the fence up, go ahead now and use your judgment as to what next to do, from what you get out of the book. Well, here’s my buggy; the driver will take you home. Good night, partner!”

He shook hands cordially and vanished into the store. Joe, his precious book held tightly in his lap, was soon whirled home behind the Somerville trotter, and made up his mind that some day he was going to have a horse and buggy exactly like that when he got to making money farming.

CHAPTER III

THE next day was Sunday.

Tom Weston was red-eyed and surly from the effects of the liquor he had drunk the night before with Jim Sullivan, and moped about the house, snarling and snapping at his wife, and little Annie and Joe.

As soon as breakfast was finished Joe took his precious *Elements of Agriculture* and slipped off to a sheltered nook behind the barn. He pored over it until dinner-time; then he closed his eyes and reviewed in his mind the essential points of what he had read.

First of all, that plants must have food, just as human beings do; that lack of enough food or proper food made puny plants, just as it does with people; that the principal source of food for plants is the humus or decaying vegetable matter in the soil. From this largely comes the nitrogen, the phosphoric acid, the potash, and other essentials to plant life, absorbed through the thousands of tiny roots of the growing plant above.

Also, he learned that the soil becomes barren

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and exhausted and devoid of these essentials with continued cultivation; that the crop takes these necessary things from the soil year by year, and something must be put back into the land, or it will become sterile.

"The wise provisions of Nature are seen," said the book, "in the annual renewal of the soil. The grass, weeds, trees, shrubs, all take from the soil in the summer, but they pay back the debt with interest in autumn, when the grass dies and the leaves fall to the ground. They are beaten into the soil by the winter rains, and by the next summer have decayed, and have given more to the land than the plants that bore them have taken away."

"And I never knew before," said Joe to himself, "what makes newly cleared ground so rich and give such large crops. Of course, it is the humus from the leaves that have been dropping all the years."

After dinner he began to devour the book again. By dusk he knew that in order to get the largest amount of plant-food to the plants to fatten them, as it were, a deep plowing or breaking and loosening of the soil was essential until it was light and mellow. This allowed the tiny rootlets, each with hundreds of minute hungry mouths, to have a wider range in search of the life-giving juices in the soil, and

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thereby furnish the strength to make larger, more virile plants. The stronger the plants, the more fruit, the better and larger fruit they made as a reward to the planter for this care.

"Daddy," said Joe, Monday morning, "please come on and let's pick out the four acres Mr. Somerville and me are going to work."

"All right, I'll give you part of that field across from the oak grove; it's so blame poor it won't sprout peas—I want to see what you-all are going to do with that."

"Come on down, then; let's lay it off. I know how poor it is, and the sooner something is done to it the better."

A tape-line was secured, and the plot of four acres, two of the acres abutting on the road, was marked with stakes. It was poor land, distressingly poor, as the stunted dead grass and scantily nourished weeds attested. It was part of an old field that had been cultivated for sixty years.

"I don't guess you'll do much with that," announced Mr. Weston, with a triumphant grin.

"It's pretty bad, but we'll do the best we can," said Joe. "I don't reckon you've got any objection to my cutting enough locust wood posts from the thicket back of the hill to fence this?"

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"Not if you trim the tops and limbs for firewood and have it hauled up to the house."

"All right, sir."

Just then old Uncle Jeff Washington and his boy, Abe Lincoln Washington, came shuffling down the road, both of them with their hands in their pockets.

"Want a job, Uncle Jeff?" inquired Joe.

"Who? Me?"

"No; you. You heard what I said."

"Well, suh, hit sorter 'pens' on whut de job is?"

"Getting out some locust fence-posts."

"Who fer?"

"They are 'fer' the King of Siam, but as a matter of fact I am having the work done, if that's any consolation to you."

"Yasser, I reckon I'll take de job nex' week."

"You'll take it now or not at all."

"Well, ef hit's er hurry job, den I reckon I'll hatter take hit now. I wucks fer er dollar en two bits er day en mer viddles."

"Not for me; I've seen you work. You kill too much time. I will pay you five cents a post, and you must trim the branches and tops for firewood and furnish your own rations."

"Wh-who gwine pay fer all dis?" Joe pulled his check-book from his inside pocket.

"When I write a check the Farmers' Bank will pay it. You'll get your money all right."

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"Dat's all I wanter know. Lead me ter dem locus'es."

"Hold on a minute. Do you want to hire Link here out for a few days?"

"Whut doin'?"

"Helping me. I'll give you forty cents a day for him, and give him his dinner. It isn't any harder work than I am going to do."

"Yasser, Mister Joe, I rents 'im ter you. Link, you do whut he tells you, en ef you don' do hit I gwine ter take de hide offen you. Does you heah me, boy?"

"Yasser, I heahs you." Abe Lincoln's glance at his parent was sad and reproachful. Abe was fat and lazy and hated to work.

"All right," said Joe. "Uncle Jeff, go get your ax and start in on that locust thicket; you know where it is. Want the posts eight feet long."

Uncle Jeff ambled down the road toward his cabin. Link, a big, overgrown boy two years older than Joe, stood awkwardly waiting for orders.

"Come on, Link," said Joe, walking into the grove of oak trees, leaving his father in the road eying him curiously. Mr. Weston was dying to know what Joe was going to do next, but would not ask.

In the oak grove the dry leaves lay more than

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shoe-top deep. Joe took his knife, cut a good-sized bundle of young sprouts, and tied them together, making a stiff broom. With this he began to sweep leaves, and it worked admirably.

"Link, you take this broom and sweep these leaves in piles. Make one about every thirty feet. I'll be back shortly."

Leaving Link at work, Joe hustled past his father, and soon returned from the barn with four large oat sacks. Link had several good-sized piles of leaves ready. Joe held two sacks and made Link cram them full of the dry leaves; and, instructing him to fill the other two, Joe swung the full sacks upon his shoulders, marched across the road, and emptied them on his four acres. Then back, and, securing the two Link had filled, he emptied them, the others meanwhile in turn having been loaded.

Mr. Weston grinned derisively. Joe was really too busy to notice him. Until noon the boys worked like beavers, and by that time a third of an acre had been covered with leaves over shoe-top deep. Bright and early next morning they resumed work, after having put in a steady afternoon, and by the time dinner was ready one acre had been covered. Another day covered another acre and cleaned up about all the leaves in the grove.



JOE WAS TOO BUSY TO NOTICE HIM

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That night Mr. Weston undertook to have some fun at Joe's expense.

"Goin' to tote leaves from that next grove?" he inquired. The next grove was nearly a mile away.

"No, too far; won't pay." This common-sense view stumped him for a while.

"Daddy, I'll give you ten cents a load for what fertilizer there is in the barn-yard.

"Ain't none there—not over a load or so. You can have it for that price if you get it up." Mr. Weston had never thought of it as having any value at all, and never collected it or used it on crops.

Next morning Joe and Link, each with a hoe, began scraping the cow-lot and barn floor, going down after the thick layer of well-rotted humus-forming material that had accumulated for several years, and which Mr. Weston had placed no value on whatever. Eleven two-horse wagon-loads were secured. Joe borrowed his father's wagon and scattered the entire lot on the acre he proposed to plant corn upon.

"That's my corn acre, Link," he explained. "I'm going to try to grow some corn here like it ought to be. What's the most corn you and Uncle Jeff ever made to the acre?"

"I dunno, 'zac'ly, but hit wuz in de neighborhood of fifteen bushels."

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Joe bought eight more loads of barn-yard fertilizer from a neighbor at twenty cents a load, delivered, and put that on his cotton acre.

Then he made an arrangement with another neighbor who had a plow suitable for deep breaking, and stipulated that four mules were to be attached to it.

"What'n the name of peace you want that fer? Yer goin' ter tear the bottom plumb outer this field. Goin' ter plow plumb down ter Chiny?" inquired the farmer.

"Yes; I'm going to tear the bottom out. I want that land broke fourteen inches deep; cross-broke, and then harrowed."

"All right, you're the doctor on that. I'll charge you eight dollars."

"That's a trade; hitch up. I want to get it broken as soon as possible."

The plowman was greatly astonished at the amount of leaves on the two acres and the amount of fertilizer spread. Then he sunk the heavy plow to the shank on the outer edge of the measured lot; the four mules strained, and a great heavy ribbon of dirt rolled over from the plow as it moved forward. Eight inches below the surface the ground was sterile and poor. Below that depth it was fairly good. This was the dirt the light one-horse plows could never reach.

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The great turning-plow reversed things: the poor dirt was thrown to the bottom, and the comparatively good soil was by the operation brought to the top. The leaves and fertilizer were covered and well mixed in.

Then a crosswise plowing at the same depth, to break up the packed soil and immense hard flakes, and a harrowing to further pulverize it, and Joe wrote his first check. The man looked at the signature, Weston & Somerville, as though he thought Joe had gone entirely crazy.

"What's all this here foolishness?" he asked, holding the check gingerly.

"You present that at the bank, and if they don't pay it Mr. Somerville will—he's my partner," announced Joe, proudly.

"Well, I'm goin' to town now an' see about it, an' if it ain't paid there's goin' to be trouble," said the man, truculently.

"Oh, don't get excited about it; wait until it isn't paid before you start anything."

"I'm goin' right now," repeated the man.

"All right; I'll just go with you. I want to get some seed, and I'll get you to haul them out for me," said Joe, as he climbed into the wagon.

CHAPTER IV

“HELLO, partner! What are you doing here?” inquired Mr. Somerville, as Joe, after having seen the bank-teller honor his check promptly by paying eight dollars to the plowman, walked into the store.

“I’ve come in to get eight bushels of rye.”

“What for?”

“I’m going to sow it broadcast thick over the four acres. I’ve already had it broken, cross-broke, and harrowed, fourteen inches deep, and I’m ready to plant.”

“But we are not going to raise rye, Joe?” was the dubious query.

“No, sir; but we are going to make rye raise cotton and corn for us.”

“How?”

“Well, this is October. Let the rye grow until January; then turn it under, and it will rot by planting-time and lighten that old barren soil a heap, besides furnishing a good deal of valuable plant-food.”

“Well, now, where’d you get that idea?” asked Mr. Somerville, in admiration.

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"Saw it in one of those bulletins the state commissioner gave me the other day."

"Well, it's worth trying. If the state says it's the thing to do I reckon we can afford to do it. What else have you done?"

Joe told him about the leaves, and the barn-yard scrapings, and the eight loads of fertilizer he bought. His partner clapped him on the shoulder.

"That's the stuff—we'll show these folks around here something about farming yet."

"Now, please, sir, get that wire fencing out to-morrow—I don't want the neighbors' pigs to eat up our rye."

"You can count on the wire and man to put it up. Are you keeping count of expenses?"

"Yes, sir; I'm not going to pay out a cent except by check, so we can have a receipt for every payment."

"That is sound business."

"And I wish, if you please, sir, you'd write around and find out the best varieties of seed-corn to plant, and the best sort of cotton."

"Yes, we must get the very best varieties. I think we can get a corn that will bring two and three ears to the stalk instead of only one, like the sorts we have around here."

"And about the cotton, Mr. Somerville; I've

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heard daddy say that he always got more for his first bale than any other."

"That is usually true, if the first bale is early, before the main crop is dumped on the market. With two or three million bales of cotton all over the South being offered for sale at once, of course the price goes down." Joe pondered a moment.

"Then it seems to me," he said, "if we can get a sort of cotton that will be ready to pick before the rest we will make more off it, won't we?"

"Exactly. If we get a naturally quick maturing variety, and give it every opportunity, and hasten it along with stimulating chemical fertilizers, we ought to beat the main crop by three weeks and get at least fifteen dollars a bale for it."

"Well, you see about writing for the seed, and let's get the earliest variety we can that gives a big crop. If we just get an early cotton that don't make much of a crop we haven't gained anything on the standard cotton that makes a heavy crop but is late, have we?"

"You're a pretty close figurer, Joe. I'll attend to the seed."

"Look here, Mr. Somerville, let's put one of those acres in oats instead of sowing it in rye, and not plow the oats under."

"Not much money in an acre of oats—"

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"Not by itself, but I can get the oats off by the middle of May or first of June, and then plant it in Mexican June corn with cow-peas sowed broadcast in the rows."

"Well, that sounds better—two crops a year off that land—"

"Better than that. I'll pull the fodder from the corn-stalks the last of July, or first of August. We ought to get two hundred and fifty bundles of fodder worth two and a half cents a bundle—"

"That's three crops—fine!"

"Then that corn will be matured by the middle of September; get it off at once—"

"Yes; then what?"

"Cut all those pea vines and dry them. They make the best sort of hay, and you know what it sells for."

"I can get twelve dollars and a half a ton for it any time."

"We ought to get a ton off that acre—that will be a sort of extra crop."

"I should think that would be about enough to make one acre produce in a year, Joe—oats, corn, fodder, hay?"

"No, sir, not yet," laughed Joe. "The reason I want to plant the cow-peas is that I saw in the *Elements* that pea vines are a 'legume' and gather nitrogen from the air, and store it away in the soil in little warts, or 'nodules,' on the

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roots of the vine, and that a crop of pease on land is worth a ton of commercial fertilizer for the next crop-year. Then there will be a lot of fallen leaves from the pea vines to be plowed under, and they will add some humus to the soil."

"I always heard that a crop of cow-pease helped land, but I never knew exactly why," said Mr. Somerville.

"Haven't you been studying your *Elements of Agriculture*?" asked Joe, severely. "I've been through mine once, and am half through it again. And I don't leave a page until I can remember the sense of it."

"Well, the truth is, Joe, I've been so busy here at the store, and our bookkeeper has been sick."

"I reckon it is right hard for you to find the time. Well, as I was saying, I'll get those pea vines off, knock down the corn-stalk into the low furrows, then get a turning-plow and 'bed' that acre up on those stalks and pea-vine leaves and roots to form 'humus' for spring."

"Then you ought to give that land a rest."

"No, sirree!" Joe shook his head. "Land don't need rest as long as you put something back into it for what your crops take out. I'll sow that acre down in White Milan turnips; they are quick growers, and we can sell every one of them here in town before Christmas."

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"Five crops in one year from one acre—it hardly seems possible, Joe!"

"It is possible, for it has been done. See here?" Joe hauled from his pocket a clipping from a country newspaper in another part of the state, telling of what a progressive farmer there had done. "I found that paper in the road, and I laid awake ever so long last night thinking it over after I read about that man, and it works out all right."

"That is certainly 'farming some'!" said the senior partner. "And just to think, most of the people around here are satisfied to get less than one-fourth of that amount of produce from their land!"

"That sort of farming don't satisfy me," said Joe, decisively.

"Or me either, now I know what can be done. And by the way, Joe, there's a commercial-fertilizer concern offering a prize of a hundred dollars to the boy in the Corn Club contest in the state who makes the largest crop with their fertilizer. The state chemist certifies that the product of that factory is up to standard."

"We've got to use some chemical fertilizer, and we might as well take a chance on that prize, too," said Joe.

"All right, we'll go after everything, and there's a nitrate-of-soda firm offering another

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hundred the same way, but I don't know much about that stuff. Do you?"

"Yes, sir. Nitrate is the quickest way for plants to get nitrogen, and that is the main element. Just scatter the stuff on the ground about corn just before it tassels, and the books say it will increase the crop nearly one-third. It's fine for cotton, too—pushes it right along."

"I've never seen any of the nitrate, or heard of it being used about this neck of the woods," said Mr. Somerville.

"Neither have I. The book says it comes mostly from Chile, and it looks like common, coarse, dirty salt, and dissolves quickly in water or by the moisture of the ground. That is how the roots get it so soon after it is applied. When it strikes the roots that plant just everlastingly hustles."

"If we go in for all these things and win out, Joe, it's a pretty big prize in money alone on the corn. There's seventy-five dollars for the winner in this county, a hundred dollars for the fertilizer, and another hundred for the nitrate—two hundred and seventy-five dollars—but that is in competition with the entire state."

"I'm going to do my level best, and when a fellow does that he'd as soon compete with the whole world as not."

"That's the way to look at it. Then there is

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the state certificate and the trip to Washington—”

“I certainly want that trip,” said Joe. “I want to talk to the head men of the Department of Agriculture at Washington, and see what they are doing. I want to go right to headquarters and see for myself and learn something.”

“What are you going to do with your money if you win it?”

“Well, half of it is yours, you know—”

“No, indeed; half the *crop* money is mine; the prizes belong to you if you win.”

“Much obliged, but I thought you ought to have half—”

“No, I’ll be satisfied with the crop money.”

“That’s mighty good of you. Well, sir, the first thing I’m going to do is to buy Annie a nice outfit of clothes and send her to that Agricultural High School over in Limestone County, so she can learn all about cooking, and sewing, and raising chickens, and honey and dairying, and all that sort of thing, so she can run an up-to-date farm home.”

“That’s a splendid idea—our country-girls are even less enlightened on domestic economy than the boys are on farming, as a rule.”

“I want her to have some chances herself.”

“What else will you do, Joe?”

“Why, I’ll buy mother a new dress, then put

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the rest of the money in the bank at interest. I'll work another year and make some more. Then I'm going to the very best agricultural school in the United States and stay a year. I'll have the actual experience then and can understand and appreciate what it teaches."

"That's a pretty extensive program. Anything else?"

"Yes, sir. I'm coming back here and buy me a ten-acre place and make the crops pay for it. Then as soon as I get on my feet I am going to add five or ten acres every year until I get it the size I want.

"That's the kind of talk I like to hear. Farming offers just as many and more opportunities than business, if a man will just apply business methods to it. It is the most independent and happiest life in the world."

"Then every year or so I want to go off to a good agricultural school for a month or more and do special study—keep up with what is going on—and I'll be able after a while to give mother a good home where she won't have to work herself to death and can kind of take it easy."

"You'll do," said the merchant, shaking hands with him as the wagon rolled up to receive the oats and rye. "Good-by, and you just go ahead and use your judgment."

CHAPTER V

THE fence was built next day, with a substantial lock upon the gate, and Joe carried the key in his pocket.

With the assistance of Link he sowed the rye thickly on three acres, and oats on the other. He hired his father's team and harrow, agreeing to pay a dollar for the use of it, and harrowed the grain thoroughly into the finely pulverized soil.

The many spikes, or teeth, of the harrow had by this time demolished every clod, and the surface of the field was level and smooth, with a slight slope to the south, which insured drainage.

Passers-by on the county road began to stop and watch his operations. Most of the farmers grinned indulgently and predicted that nothing would come of "all that foolishness." A few of them went to thinking, and without saying anything about it went home and gathered up leaves and trash and barn-yard fertilizer, and plowed an acre or so deeply, just as a matter of

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curiosity, to see what would happen. A few others sowed oats or rye just as Joe did.

The rye came up—a splendid, thick stand of it. In a few weeks it had spread, forming a solid mat of luscious green. Hungry hogs prowled squealingly around the hog-proof fence; hungry cows looked and longed and lowed disconsolately, for it was near Christmas-time, and there was no green pasture available for the poor creatures, and dead grass is not very satisfying.

Jim Sullivan stopped his team in the road one day and gazed admiringly in the field.

“Got a fine stand thar, Joe!” he called.

“Pretty good—yes, sir!”

“What’ll you charge me to let me graze these here horses in that patch awhile? They’re powerful puny. I never made no feed to speak of last fall, an’ if I don’t strengthen ’em up some I’m afeard they won’t pull through the winter.”

Joe gazed at the scrawny, weak animals and felt sorry for them. He recalled the four dollars Jim had paid for the liquor last fall, and thought if it had been invested in oats the horses and Jim would both have been a good deal better off.

“Why, I hardly know, Mr. Sullivan—”

“I ain’t got no money now, Joe, but I’ll pay you next fall when my cotton comes in.” Joe remembered hearing Mr. Somerville say Sullivan

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was mighty bad pay, that he spent every cent he could get his hands on for liquor.

"That ain't business, Mr. Sullivan. I can't afford to wait that long. Tell you what I will do, though. I saw that old white-faced sow of yours with a new litter of pigs about a month ago. I'll pasture your horses here until the first of the year for two of those little pigs."

"That's a go—I'll bring 'em over and turn the hosses in."

"All right, but you better call me when you come. I keep that gate locked."

Sullivan drove on, his ungreased wagon-wheels squeaking a dismal tune, and the shaky wagon rattling and jingling in all its joints from being left exposed and unsheltered in all sorts of weather.

Joe went to the barn and got a sack. From the oak grove he managed to scrape up four sackfuls of leaves. These he placed in a corner of the fence. Then he cut a pole about ten feet long and ran it catercornered through the wires of the two lines of fence about three feet from the ground. Several shorter ones were placed behind it to the angle formed by the fence-corner post.

With his hatchet he cut pine brush from the bushes in an old field, and piled them on the poles in the fence corner, the stems all pointing to the

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front, until a thick thatch formed a sloping roof which would shed rain. Then he piled more pine brush about the two sides formed by the converging wire fence, and climbed over and surveyed his work.

He had made a cozy rain-and-wind-proof shelter, and he smiled as he thought of how those uncared-for pigs of Sullivan's would enjoy it. Across the road was a spring branch and an abandoned wash-tub from the house, with an approach of dirt banked to its edge, which, set down and placed in the field, formed a watering-place for the pigs. Joe thoughtfully put several large stones in the tub so that the water was not over five inches deep. In case one of the pigs fell in, it would not drown.

Next morning Jim Sullivan brought the pigs, lively, spotted little fellows, but poor as snakes. Joe turned them loose in the field, and they began eating the tender young rye as if they were famished. Jim's scrawny horses were also ravenously devouring the green stuff. After stipulating that Sullivan was to fill the water tub each morning and evening Joe locked the gate and went up to the house.

"Mother, you and sister come with me. I've got something to show you," he said.

"All right. Come on, Annie," called Mrs. Weston. And they followed Joe down the

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road to his "farm," as they called the four acres.

"Oh-h, brother, look at those old horses in your farm! Let's run them out!" cried Annie.

"Hurry, son! They are just gobbling your rye."

Joe laughed.

"That's what I put them in there for. I'm renting it for a pasture for a while."

"But they are eating up the rye!" objected his mother.

"That won't hurt it—really benefits it. Those first shoots nipped off makes the roots throw out twice as many more, and makes each plant stronger and thicker."

"Oh, and there are two horrid little pigsies in there, too! I'll chase them out for you." said Annie.

"I thought you said that hog-proof fencing would keep them out?" inquired Mrs. Weston.

"It will—and keep them in, too. Those are my pigs, and I put them in there. I traded pasturage with Jim Sullivan for them."

"They are mighty little—and poor," observed his mother.

"I feels sorry for them—just look at their poor little ribs?" said Annie.

"Which do you like best, sis?"

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"That cute little one with the white face and the curly tail."

"All right; that's your pig, and his name is John L. Sullivan, and the other one is named Mike Sullivan."

"Oh, thank you for John L., Buddy! I just love my pig now!"

"The other one belongs to you, mother."

"Why, I'm obliged to you, son, but I hardly know what to do with it—we have no pen, you know."

"You and Annie just save the kitchen scraps for them. I'll feed them on this rye and oats awhile, and that will give them a good start. Then I'll build a pen nearer the house. If we keep them growing right, each one ought to weigh three hundred pounds by next fall."

"But, son, we couldn't use all that meat—"

"No'm; I know that, and I didn't mean for us to eat them. I wanted you to have something for your very own—you and Annie. Those hogs will bring fifteen dollars apiece or maybe more next fall—I want you and sister to take the money, every cent of it, and buy you some new dresses and things."

Tears welled up into his mother's eyes. It had been a long time since she had bought a new dress. Her garments were really so shabby and rusty that she would not go to church, and some

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unkind little girls had made fun of Annie at Sunday-school not long since, which sent her home, her little heart sorely hurting. She danced about in glee.

"Oh, I'm going to have a velvet cap with a red feather in it, and a red-and-black worsted dress, and a pair of new shoes, and some stockings that ain't patched!" she cried, hugging her brother.

"It's mighty good of you, son, to think of your mother that way," said Mrs. Weston.

"It isn't half of what I am going to do when I get a start," answered Joe, stoutly.

"Son, it isn't so much what you do, but it is the fact that you thought of your mother and sister and wanted to help them that makes me happy," smiled his mother.

"Well, I just saw a chance to pick up something that would give you and sis something all your very own. It—it gives a person a heap more interest in everything to own something, don't it?"

"Indeed it does, Joe."

John L. and Mike, now filled to repletion, sought the shelter Joe had constructed for them, and snuggled among the dry leaves with many contented grunts.

"Ain't you going to feed 'em, Buddy?"

"Not now—just a few scraps from the house

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and maybe a nubbin of corn a day for variety. This rye is about all they need."

"Why—that won't fatten them," said Mrs. Weston.

"No'm; but that government bulletin says it's a waste of feed to try to fatten hogs under eight months old if they are to be kept until they are a year old. All we want to do is to give them enough to keep them healthy and growing fast—and that green feed will do it. It will build up a good strong frame to hang all that fat on during the last three months."

"Pigs is dirty beasts," announced Annie, as if she had discovered something new.

"Because the people that own them put them in nasty, little, muddy pens, keep pouring swill and slops in there, and never give it a chance to dry out. Hogs don't like filth."

"And they wallows in mudholes!" argued Annie.

"They do that to kill the flies and insects that bother them, and to keep cool in summer. Mud isn't filthy. Give a hog a good range for pasture and clean water to drink, and he is clean as a cow."

Annie was not convinced.

"They eats nasty slops," she announced, crushingly.

"If the slops are nasty it's the fault of the

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people that give them to the hogs. Pigs naturally graze like cows and horses, and would rather eat nice green grass or grain than slops any time," said Joe.

"I never knew that before," remarked his mother, "but come to think of it, they always do seem to be eating something off the ground."

"It's grass, and weeds, and roots, and such stuff. And they don't mind a nice fat cricket or a grasshopper, either," said Joe.

As the three strolled back to the house Mrs. Weston looked over in the field behind the barn. There was Mr. Weston with the two-horse turning-plow breaking about five acres of land as deeply as he could sink the plow.

"Well, I never!" she exclaimed. "This is the first time I ever heard of your father breaking any land before March. Joe, I wonder what put him in that notion?"

"He seen Buddy doing it," announced Annie, with an air of conviction. His mother and sister continued toward the house, and Joe went to where his father was steadily plowing.

"What you going to plant, daddy?" he asked. Mr. Weston grinned a bit sheepishly.

"I ain't never thought about plantin' oats till I seen you do it, and I just figgered I could foller the oats with late corn, an' maybe some pea-vine hay for these critters, and make a double crop

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on the land. It's pretty late to be plantin' oats, though, ain't it? You don't s'pose it's too late, do you?"

It was the first time his father had ever recognized him as knowing anything at all about farming, and to be asked as an authority compensated for a whole lot of things.

"No, sir; they'll 'make' all right. If I were you I'd cross-break this land, and I'll harrow it for you to-morrow."

"Exactly what I was goin' to do," said his father.

"And, daddy, if you want to, you can turn those horses in on my rye nights when Sullivan's horses are off. I think some green stuff would help them a whole lot."

"Now that's mighty clever, son—an' you needn't pay for the use of the wagon to haul that fertilizer in, nor for the use of the harrow and horse."

"Thank you, sir. I'm going up now and see how much seed-oats I have left—I think there is a bushel and a half. You may have 'em—it will save you just that much."

His father's eyes followed him up the hill toward the house. Joe felt nearer to his father than he could ever recall before—more on an equality as a comrade with him.

"Giddap, Baldy!" called Tom Weston to the

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lazy one of his team. "Baldy, I thought that boy was actin' the fool about these leaves an' stuff an' this here deep plowin'. It ain't him, Baldy; it's me. Giddap—by granny, I got to be makin' up for a lot of time I've lost by bein' pig-headed."

That night Joe got down his account-book. One page he had headed "Expense," and there he carefully entered every cent paid out for posts, wire, labor, seed. On the opposite side he wrote the heading "Income," for the first results of his farming operations that had come in the shape of two scrawny little pigs.

"Received from J. Sullivan two spotted pigs, six weeks old; value, two dollars each—total, four dollars," he entered. On another page he headed, "J. Weston in acct. with Weston & Somerville." He had taken the pigs in for the firm, but presented both to his mother and sister.

"To one of the Sullivan pigs," he wrote under his individual account, then paused. He started to charge the pig at the two-dollar value, but at once put the thought from him.

"One of those pigs is mine; the other is Mr. Somerville's. If I take his pig and make a present of it I should settle with Mr. Somerville at what the pig would be worth when he and

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I settle in the fall. I'll pay for it out of my share of the crop," he said to himself. Then he picked up the pen.

"To one of the Sullivan pigs, fifteen dollars," he wrote.

CHAPTER VI

JOE could handle a small single-horse plow himself, but a two-horse turning-plow was a bit beyond his strength.

He made a trade with his father, therefore, who agreed to turn the rye under for three dollars on the three acres. Bess and Baldy, the horses, had been greatly improved by grazing upon the strength-giving green food, and looked almost like different animals.

The third week in January was bright and dry, so after the rye had been turned under Joe borrowed the harrow and one horse and smoothed the three acres again himself, thus making it fine and level and covering some of the rye that showed in the furrows left by the plow. The acre of oats was not disturbed, and John L. and Mike, the Sullivan pigs, were left in the field to graze upon it.

Saturday morning Mr. Weston hitched up the wagon to go to town, and Joe went with him.

"Well, partner, how's everything coming along?" inquired Mr. Somerville, shaking hands cordially.

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"All right, sir. Got the ground in fine shape now, and a mighty pretty stand of oats."

"What do you think of Joe as a book farmer now, Tom?" inquired Mr. Somerville, with a sly wink. Mr. Weston looked embarrassed for a moment.

"Think enough of him to foller him some," he laughed. "I've put in four acres of oats and one of rye I'd never 'a' thought of plantin' until I seen him do it. Then I've plowed deep five acres also an' bedded it up for corn an' cotton, only I ain't put no leaves in it or fertilizer. I want to see if there's anything to all this."

"Now that's the talk. If there is, you are considerably ahead, and if there isn't you haven't lost anything but some time."

"That's the way I figgered it."

"Joe, I'm about ready to order the cotton-seed and the seed-corn," said Mr. Somerville.

"Now, that's another thing," said Tom Weston; "I wanted to see if you'd order the same sort for me you 'n' Joe plant. 'Pears to me the corn we raise around here oughter have two ears on hit 'stid of one. The stalk's there, an' it ain't no more trouble to have another ear on hit an' get twicet as much corn?" Joe and Mr. Somerville exchanged brief smiles.

"Why, Tom, you are getting to be a sort of book farmer yourself!"

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"That ain't no book farmin'; that's just hoss-sense."

"That is all book farming is, just the latest and newest and most reliable common sense, only it is just more common sense than most of us have thought of, that's all."

"What cotton have you selected, Mr. Somerville?" asked Joe.

"A sort the government has tested on ten experiment farms in this latitude for the last four years. It averages three weeks ahead of anything we have, and the staple, or fiber, of the cotton is over an inch long. It is said to be a very heavy bearer also. It ought to bring a fine price if kept free of dirt and trash and stain."

"All right, sir; that's the kind we want."

"Jes' order me enough of that, too, so's I can plant three acres, will you?" asked Tom Weston.

"Glad to do it, Tom. The price is a bit steep, though."

"Don't care what the price is. If it makes cotton like you say it does I can well afford to buy it, and I'll sell the seed myself next fall to folks around here. It beats any cotton ever grewed around this country."

"Very well; I'll order enough for you. And, Joe, I've got a corn that will make two ears to the stalk certain, the grower says."

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"I'm going to breed me a three and four ear variety," said Joe.

"You're agoin' to do *what?*" inquired his father, sarcastically.

"Breed a three and four ear variety." Tom Weston laughed.

"Folks 'breed' cattle an' sich, but I never heered nothin' of 'breedin' corn," he said.

"How do you suppose this two-ear variety we are going to plant got started, then, Tom?" inquired Mr. Somerville.

"Why—why—er—it is—er—it's jest that sort of corn," he floundered.

"Certainly it is, but why did it happen to be that sort?"

"Well, I'm blamed if I know, to tell the truth about it."

"If you'd read some of Joe's books you'd find out a lot of things you don't know. Now tell your dad, Joe, how you are going to 'breed' a three-ear corn."

Joe was embarrassed, but plunged bravely in.

"It takes several years to do it, daddy. Now, this seed-corn we are getting is 'fixed' at two ears to the stalk—we can depend on that much. If we give it all the plant-food it can take, some of it is going to show three ears, but the third ears are not going to be much more than nubbins."

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"Well, I don't see no advantage in them nubbins."

"Yes, sir; nubbins are good to feed hogs on. But if we go through that field and pick out the best stalks with three ears on them, and then pick the most perfect ears from the lot, and plant the seed from them next year, the nubbins will be bigger, and more of them on an average, and maybe some of the stalks will show—show—"

"Rudimentary ears," said Mr. Somerville.

"Thanks; I couldn't remember it, but it means just the beginning of an ear—not developed. Then if the best of those stalks is saved for seed, next year the rudimentary ears will be larger."

"I begin to sort of catch on now," said Tom Weston.

"Each year the selected seed, the best of the last year's crop, will in time produce a perfect third ear, and several years of this work will 'fix' the habit of the corn so that every stalk can be depended on to bring three ears. Then a person can keep on."

"Well, if that ain't the plumb limit!"

"No, sir; not the limit. I'm going to have a four-ear corn before I quit."

"You reckon all that is really true?" asked Tom Weston.

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"Of course it is, Tom. It has been proved too many times to doubt it; it is just a question of care and patience."

"Well, well, well! Why, if Joe gets that corn up to four ears he's got a pretty good thing, ain't he?"

"Got a fortune. It would sell for five dollars a bushel for seed."

"Whew!"

"And a four-ear corn ought to make two hundred bushels to the acre without a bit of trouble, and two hundred bushels at five dollars is a thousand dollars an acre, isn't it, dad?" His father gazed at him with unwonted respect.

"Think I'll borry some of them books of yourn and do some readin' myself," said Tom; "but I never had no chance when I was a chap, an' readin' is powerful slow work fer me. I've done mighty little of it, too."

"You can't start any sooner, Tom," said the merchant.

"That's right; I just learned that much."

"I came in to talk to you about that fourth acre, Mr. Somerville," said Joe.

"Our yam-potato one?"

"Yes, sir; we ought to raise more than potatoes on it."

"Can we?"

"Yes, sir."

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"Then it's our duty to do it. We ought to do it."

"I thought so, but you're my partner, and I thought you ought to have a say about it."

"Well, I say plant it, but I don't know what to suggest—early corn?"

"No, sir; couldn't get that off in time. I was thinking of putting in a crop of extra early English pease, and snap-beans and radishes, and get them off in time to plant the potatoes; we don't have to plant them until along in June."

"That ain't farmin'; that's truck-growin'," said Mr. Weston.

"Don't care what you call it, it's making money out of the ground," asserted Joe.

"Seems to be a pretty good idea to me, except we can't sell all that stuff around here."

"Nearly everybody in Brierfield's got gardens, and wouldn't pay fancy prices for garden sass nohow," said Joe's father.

"I know that, daddy, but I'm going to let Mr. Somerville do the selling. If he'll get me the right sort of crates and boxes to pack those things in he can express them to Chicago and St. Louis and Cincinnati and come right in behind the Florida truck, and we ought to get good prices."

"I'll order the crates and boxes and get in

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correspondence with some good produce houses in those cities."

"All right, sir—and please save the sugar barrels from the store here."

"What for?"

"Pack radishes in 'em. Take an auger and bore holes for ventilation, and fill the barrels with bunches of radishes and some ice mixed in, and then tack cloth over the top."

"Now, who told you that?"

"Old Mr. Schneider. He stopped at my farm one day. He used to be a truck-farmer before he got too old. He suggested the pease and things."

"Joe, one thing about being educated is to enable you to see the worth of a suggestion. Come to think about it, I believe there is good money in early garden-truck, and we'll try it out and see. What seed do you want?"

"Bushel and a half of the Alaska pea—that's about the earliest sort, that's a standard, so Mr. Schneider says, and it don't have to be stuck with brush for the vines to run on; also a bushel of the Valentine stringless green-pod snap-beans, and two quarts of the white-tipped French breakfast radish."

"Very well, I will order to-night."

Getting a new hoe, rake, ball of carpenter's twine, and a sack of commercial fertilizer adapted



"WHAT'S YER HURRY, TOM?"

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JOE, THE BOOK FARMER

to vegetables, Joe loaded them in his father's wagon. Just as Mr. Weston climbed in Jim Sullivan rode up and hitched his horse to the Somerville Mercantile Company rack.

"What's yer hurry, Tom?"

"Well, I've got some things to 'tend to at home—"

"Aw, wait awhile. I've got a gallon of bug-juice—th' real old genoowine red-eye—a-comin' on th' noon train—"

"Much obliged, Jim, but—"

"We can drown our sorrer some, Tom—"

"I ain't a-feelin' sorrerful to-day, Jim; besides, I promised the missus I'd fix a pig-lot for her."

"Say, hol' on, Tom, an' git a couple of snorts of that booze."

"Thankee, Jim, but to be plumb plain about it, by gosh, I've quit. I've wasted too much time an' money foolin' with it. That's one reason I'm poor as a snake now and ain't got nothin'. So I jes' allowed I'd try another tack. Good-by."

The Weston wagon rattled on down the street, leaving Jim Sullivan staring in wide-eyed amazement at the cloud of dust in the wake of his old crony of other days.

CHAPTER VII

APRIL fifteenth the last of the pease and radishes were shipped. Two thousand bunches of radishes at three cents a bunch brought sixty dollars, less eleven dollars expense for picking, bunching, washing, packing, and commission to the dealers.

Sixty bushels of English pease at two dollars a bushel brought one hundred and twenty dollars, with expense for seed, help, picking, etc., including commissions of thirty-eight dollars. Total profit thus far, with the snap-beans yet to hear from, one hundred and thirty-one dollars.

On the first, Mr. Somerville had brought three disinterested men from town, who measured the corn acre exactly, put down the stakes, and told Joe to "go ahead." He had two weeks previously measured the acre himself, opened the furrows for the corn, and put some commercial fertilizer in so that the young corn could get a sturdy, vigorous start. He also planted a bit late, so there would be no danger of cold nights chilling the corn and giving it a backset. The fertilizer in two weeks' time was largely absorbed

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into the ground, and so there was no danger of its concentrated strength burning the roots of the tender plants, yet the necessary elements were there ready for the hungry baby rootlets.

The measurements of the committee were exactly the same as Joe had made, so he commenced dropping the seed-corn, four grains every three feet, and the rows three feet apart. The committee lounged under the oaks across the road.

When the corn had been dropped in the furrows, Joe had old Baldy ready hitched to a light plow, and ran a shallow furrow next to the seed-furrow. This threw the dirt over the corn and covered it properly.

Then the committee adjourned with him to the house and certified upon the blank furnished by the Corn Club contestants for the report and record that they had seen Joseph Weston plant his acre of corn and cover it himself. They signed it, Joe signed it, and the fight was on.

From thenceforward, under the rules of the contest, no other hand than his own might touch that corn until it was safely gathered and housed. The rules permitted him to employ help in preparing the ground, but every cent paid out had to be entered on the record-sheet, the prize being not only for the boy who made the greatest crop but at the least cost.

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Thus far he had spent on the corn acre: for leaves, forty cents; having hired Abe Lincoln for two days on that work, but the other day was charged to the cotton, which was not a contest crop; work scraping fertilizer from the lot, forty cents. His father did not charge him for the fertilizer, offsetting the grazing of the horses on the rye and some work Joe did against it. The breaking of the acre cost two dollars; seed-rye, three dollars; turning it under, one dollar; one hundred pounds of commercial fertilizer, one dollar and fifty cents; seed-corn, a dollar; total, nine dollars and thirty cents.

As the rest of the four acres was not in competition, Joe hired Abe Lincoln whenever he needed him, which was constantly, now. Abe had got interested.

"You know, Mister Joe," said Abe Lincoln one day, "whut's de matter wid us niggers is, we don' know nothin', en ef we does know we's too lazy to do nuffin' wid hit."

"Lots of white folks in the same fix," answered Joe.

"Yasser, I knows dat—but I been figgerin' on all dis yer doin's, an' I made de chil'en at home help me tote leaves an' trash, an' fertilizer from de stable an' cow-lot, en' I got me er acre too. I specs ter have somethin' some er dese days merse'f."

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"That's exactly what I am going to do, Link, and if I can help you in any way—"

"Oh, you helps me by hirin' me. I goes home an' does whut you does."

"What are you going to plant on your acre, Link?"

"Well, suh, I's a plumb fool erbout sweet-'taters, dese yer sweet, honeylike yaller ones dat jes' melts in yo' mouf w'en dey's cooked wid er nice fat possum, an' plenty er dat rich gravy ter sop 'em in. Man, I's gwin ter try ter eat up dat whole acre er 'taters merse'f!"

"You'll have quite a job. You ought to follow the potatoes with turnips this fall."

"Yasser, I is—en' er good patch er collards, too. Den next year dat groun' gwine ter make a bale er cotton sho'!"

The acre of cotton was planted a day or so after the corn; then began the rush to get the snap-beans to market. Thirty bushels at one dollar and forty cents, with an expense of twelve dollars for picking, crating, hauling, and commissions, left a profit of thirty dollars. This added to the amount received brought the total on the sweet-potato acre up to one hundred and sixty-one dollars, and the commission merchant wrote to Mr. Somerville desiring to handle the next year's crop, saying that he had never had a nicer, fresher, or more desirable lot of vegetables.

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Joe exhibited the bank-book to his father with a good deal of pride.

"Well, by gum, Joe, half of that's yourn, ain't it?"

"Yes, sir; I've cleared eighty dollars and fifty cents as my part of that acre, and we will get a good crop of potatoes off it, too."

"Why, my gracious, you've made more money off that acre of truck than an acre of cotton brings around here—yes, more'n three times as much."

The pea vines were pulled up, the remains of the radishes and the bean vines were fed to the pigs, which were thriving wonderfully in a large dry pen, built by Mr. Weston.

The vegetable rows were then plowed up and bedded into rows five feet apart. Joe had bought a bushel of the rich yellow yams—"pumpkin yams" they were called—earlier in the season and bedded them in a dry, warm place to sprout. He took the sprouts off as they showed above the ground and got three rows.

In a few weeks they commenced to make vines and cover the spaces between the rows. One cloudy day when it looked like rain, Joe and Link began to cut the vines into two-foot lengths; then, placing the ends together, the cuttings were doubled into the ground about six inches deep, and the remainder of the acre

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was planted. A gentle rain fell all that night, and in a few days roots sprang from every leaf joint beneath the soil, and the acre was planted without further cost for seed.

About May 10th Joe went over his corn with a hoe and pulled from each hill the two weakest stalks. A hard rain packed the soil a few days later and necessitated another working to break the crust.

Then Joe and Link had to "chop out" the cotton. The seed was planted thickly to insure a "stand," and the object of the chopping out was to remove the surplus plants, leaving one about every two feet in the row.

As soon as this was done the oats were ready to cut, and the two boys tackled the job with hand-sickles, twisting a few of the oat-stalks about each bundle and turning the ends under so as to tie them. Five hundred and fifty bundles of oats at four cents a bundle brought twenty-two dollars more. Then Joe turned the oat-stubble under and bedded the acre for Mexican June corn.

He put Link to work hoeing the cotton and killing the luxuriantly growing crab-grass, which was making faster progress than the crop. His prize acre of corn was getting grassy also, and the corn was about waist-high. It was time for more fertilizer. He scattered a generous handful

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about each hill, then, with a light plow run twice down the middle of each row, threw the loose dirt toward the stalks and covered the fertilizer. A good rain fell next day, and one could almost see that corn grow.

Two days later, when the ground was dry enough, Joe ran a furrow through the "beds" he had thrown up where the oats were, and planted the Mexican June corn, fertilizing with one hundred pounds of the commercial stimulant placed in the rows. As soon as this was done the potatoes needed a plowing, and got it. Then an application of fertilizer to the cotton, and a plowing as he had given the corn.

The days were busy ones for Joe and his father. Both were out of bed by daylight, to meet only at meal-times and at night. Somehow, Mr. Weston seemed to have taken a new lease on life and a better grip on everything. He had plowed the garden, fixed the fences, and for the first time since Joe could remember the family had an abundance of all sorts of vegetables.

Now that the rough work of planting the garden was over, Mrs. Weston claimed that and the chickens and two pigs and the cow as her special province, assisted by Annie. The out-of-doors exercise was good for both of them, and they looked healthier and happier than Joe had ever seen them before.

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The meals used to be silent, gloomy occasions where each one finished and left as soon as possible; now when the family met it was a joyous occasion, and each one seemed to have something amusing and cheerful to tell.

"Son, aren't you going to take a rest day after to-morrow?" asked his mother, one day in mid-June.

"Well, I could—everything is getting along nicely and won't need another working until next week. What's up?"

"It's your birthday, and your father and I and Annie thought we'd make a holiday of it."

"I declare, I have been so busy I forgot it!" laughed Joe.

"I didn't," said his mother.

The subject was dropped, but on that morning Joe was allowed to sleep until eight o'clock, a most unusual thing for him. Then the wagon was ready, and the whole family climbed in for a day at Magnolia Dell, some five miles distant.

There was a beautiful, large spring at the Dell, which fed a small, clear lake, famous for its fish. Poles were provided, crickets caught for bait, and soon the party was busy landing sun-perch, blue bream, and rock-bass. A frying-pan had been brought along, with salt, meal, and lard. At dinner-time the abundance of fish was

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prepared for cooking. Joe got three good-sized stones to set the frying-pan on and built a fire.

When the fat was almost boiling, the fish were rolled in the meal, salted, and dropped in. In a few minutes each one was cooked to a crisp, golden brown.

The dinner in the basket Mrs. Weston had provided was a fine one to supplement the fish. A pitcher of lemonade made from the icy water of the spring and flavored with sprigs of mint from its edges completed the repast, partaken of with keen appetites whetted by the zest of novelty.

After lounging about on the mossy carpet beneath the great magnolia-trees in pleasant laziness, both Joe and his father fell asleep, each with a bundle of fragrant fern for a pillow. While they slept Mrs. Weston and Annie washed the dinner things, packed them in the wagon, and caught a pretty good string of perch for the morning's breakfast. It was nearly six o'clock when the tired men-folks wakened from their nap.

"Come on, Joe, let's have a swim; then we've got to be hitching up to go home," said his father.

Down at the lower end of the lake was a famous swimming-hole, with firm, sandy bottom and a spring-board to dive from. Both went into the water at once, and after a good swim and

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a brisk rub-down each felt as if he was treading on air when he walked.

Dusk had fallen over the land when they got out of the deep shadows of the woods about the lake. In the mysterious recesses of the forest a little screech-owl gave its shivering cry again and again. The whippoorwills in the distance kept advising the whipping of "poor Will," while others insisted that they were "just poor Will's widow."

Katydid's were arguing with one another that Katie did—or she didn't—a never-ending controversy. A great owl in a giant cypress-tree among the long festoons of gray Spanish moss wanted to know "Who-who-who cooks for you-u, ah?" Back in the lake among the marshy edges and lily-pads the bull-frogs began their sonorous chorus:

"Deep-very deep, very deep-deep!"

"Not very! Not very! Not very!"

"Jug-er-rum! Jug-er-rum! Jug-er-rum!"

"Deep—so deep—deep!"

Myriads of great gleaming fireflies danced in the denser shades. In the east, as the wagon rolled beyond the confines of the forest, the immense, ruddy full moon hung just above the horizon of field and meadow.

"Oh, isn't it beautiful!" exclaimed Annie and her mother in one breath.

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With the cool air of night came scents of woods and fields—the odors of wild flowers, of growing things. The air here became heavy with the perfume of yellow jasmine; farther on, the scent of magnolia blossoms. Suddenly, from high above them, a flood of rippling melody seemed to make the moonbeams vibrate.

“The mocking-bird!” cried Joe. “It’s the sweetest music in the world, for it is the best of the songs of all the other birds, improved by the mocking-bird himself!”

The joyous rascal seemed to hover above them in the enchanted silvery radiance, for as the wagon rolled in the gate at home the liquid notes of the sweetest songster of the South followed faintly, as if in echo to the memory of a perfect day.

CHAPTER VIII

JOE'S four-acre "farm" was now one of the show-places of the neighborhood.

The county road ran by it, and almost any time of day could be seen a wagon, a man on horseback, or some one afoot under the shade of the big oak on the other side, which extended its branches almost across the highway.

"Well, did you *ever* see such corn?"

"Why, that corn's so green till it's almost black—and stalk as big as my wrist now!"

"But, man alive, look at that cotton!"

"Aw, shucks, don't tell me that boy of Tom Weston's growed all that stuff hisself. I believe some of them gover'mint fellers is a-doin' it."

"What you reckon he's done to that ground in the little field? Looks diff'runt from that outside."

"*Is* diff'runt, i' granny; that outside won't hardly grow rag-weeds. Just look how poor it is!"

"Hey, sonny!" the man who said the government was doing the work called to Joe, "what you fertilizing with?"

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"Brains!" called Joe, as he resumed.

The corn was now higher than Joe's head, and as he worked in it, effectually concealed from view, he heard many amusing conversations regarding himself and the crop.

He noticed that the corn was throwing out a circle of short blunt points, or stems, each about as large around as a slate-pencil, from the two joints just above the surface of the ground. Joe did not understand what they were.

He looked through his *Elements of Agriculture*, his government reports, the state bulletins. Nowhere did he find a word about corn throwing out a radiating circle of blunt spikes from the lower joints. He was afraid to let the subject drop, for fear the corn was not doing properly. He never remembered seeing anything of the sort before; but then he reflected that he had never noticed corn very closely before.

He walked down the path leading to a distant field where his father was working, to ask him if he knew anything about it. There were a few corn-stalks standing in the edge of last year's corn-field; he parted the rank tangle of weeds about them in the hope of finding something there that would enlighten him.

The old corn-stalks had the same things on them, only much longer, a double ring of them, but each spike had curved downward and entered

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the soil. Carefully Joe dug some of the dirt away with his knife-blade—and he had the secret!

Those rings of spikes were additional main roots, which, when they made connection with the ground, sent out a network of smaller feeders to gather what the plant needed. At the end of each of those spikes was a fibrous mass of smaller roots, each spike being the main artery, or pipe, by which was conveyed all the sustenance the smaller roots at the end gathered from the soil in the form of sap to the main stem of the corn-stalk, and thence distributed to leaves and other parts of the plant. Joe sat flat upon the ground, his mind busy with a problem.

“Why should the corn be sending out those additional roots?” he asked himself.

“It must be hungry!” his mind answered.

“Yes, that’s true. But why is it hungry now? Why didn’t it do that way before?”

“It is almost through making stalk,” Reason answered. “By the time those extra roots touch the ground the stalks will begin to put on the rudimentary ears, and Nature is preparing for the extra drain upon the strength of the plant; it must have more food to mature the ears of corn.”

Joe knew the time for action had arrived. He

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hitched a horse to the single wagon and drove to town. Mr. Somerville was not at the store, but Joe did not wait for him.

"Give me two one-hundred-pound sacks of fertilizer and two one-hundred-pound sacks of nitrate of soda," he ordered.

Paying with a check—three dollars for the fertilizer and four dollars for the nitrate—he started for home as soon as the stuff was loaded into the wagon.

Opening a sack of fertilizer in the field, he filled a bucket with the yellowish, powdery stuff—a combination of cotton-seed meal, acid phosphate, phosphoric acid, kainite, and other ingredients. For a distance of about fourteen inches around each hill of corn he sprinkled a generous quantity—two good handfuls.

Finishing the first row, with his hoe he chopped the fertilizer lightly into the soil, then pulled all that dirt and some from the middle of the rows toward the corn-stalks, where it lay, a light, porous mound, easy for the rootlets to penetrate, and charged with all the elements necessary to make the corn do its level best.

He was four days doing it, and when he finished the last row in the prize acre he examined the root-stems of the first row. They had grown almost half an inch, and were nearly touching the dirt he had pulled toward them.

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He discovered another function these above-ground roots possessed. The broad leaves of the corn would catch the heavy dew each night, or some slight shower, and the moisture would condense and roll down the broad leaves until it reached the main stalk; then it would trickle down the stem until it reached this circle of roots; then down them to the soil in a perfect circle of moisture about the plant to assist in its growth.

Joe was well tired out when he got through fixing the corn, and hired Link to plow out the Mexican June corn, give the cotton a dose of fertilizer and throw some more dirt toward it, and to assist in cutting off a lot of sweet-potato vines, which were hauled to the pig-lot to give Mike and John L. some green food. The rest of the vines were thrown back without cutting on top of their rows, and a final plowing and hilling given the potatoes.

In about a week the tiny ears of corn on the stalks in the prize acre began to show. The additional roots were now striking into the fertilizer. One could almost see the corn growing, and on a still, quiet night a person could actually hear it, a faint, gentle, whispering rustle as the leaves gradually unfolded. Here and there the tassels began to show, and the pink and white silk of the young ears was growing longer.

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The time to use the nitrate of soda had arrived, and it was applied precisely as the fertilizer had been, except that Joe took a rake and merely abraded the crust of ground on the hills so the nitrate could be absorbed more rapidly. In addition, this working would not tear and break Nature's arrangement of rootlets as a deep plowing or hoeing would do. Four days after the nitrate was applied the field was in full tassel.

Joe admired the beautiful pink silk on the ends of the corn ears greatly. One day he was looking at a tassel on top of the stalk when one of the many honey-bees scrambling busily around flew, and the motion and air from the wings of the insect caused a faint puff of very fine yellow powder to drop from the tassel and float downward in the still air.

He looked the matter up in his book that night and found that the real blossom of the corn is the tassel; that the tassel is composed of hundreds of oblong little cups, open at the outer end, the other being attached to the rib, or stem, which in turn grew from the main stem of the tassel.

He found that this yellow powder was the "pollen." This was shaken out of the blooms by the wind, by bees and other insects, and fell of its own weight until some of it was caught by

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the waving silk, which was slightly damp and gummy to make it stick. Each strand of silk, he found, connected with a grain of the "embryo" or tiny corn. Each strand of silk was a sort of above-ground root, formed for the express purpose of catching a bit of the pollen powder. When the precious grains fell upon the silk it was absorbed, transmitted to the tiny grain, which then grew into a perfect one.

In this way the grain of corn was "pollenated"—one of those mysterious and wonderful requirements of Nature, the exact secret of which, and precise reasons for, have never yet been revealed to man. Certain it is, however, that if the pollen with its hidden and life-giving element does not fall upon the silk of the ears, there will be no corn, except imperfect, dwarfed grains of no vitality. After the beautiful silk has performed its life-work it turns brown and blackens, and finally dries up completely.

One more application of nitrate three weeks later in order to give the plant abundant strength to mature the grain, and Joe's work with the corn was ended. Time and nature alone could do the rest.

Full of the idea of breeding a better variety, Joe provided himself with some strips of white cotton cloth about a foot long and an inch or two wide. Then row by row he systematically

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examined the corn-stalks, hill by hill. In the first row he found ten stalks with three ears on the stalks, the third being unusually imperfect. About the two largest and best stalks with the largest and best third ear in that row he tied the white string to mark for seed.

In next to the last row, to his great joy, he found an enormous sturdy stalk with three perfect ears on it, and below the third ear a faint, rudimentary fourth ear, just a suspicion of an ear. It was the only stalk of its kind in the whole acre!

This stalk, he decided, was to be the parent of a variety that the next year would show three good ears and a more clearly defined fourth one. He would plant the seed in a patch by itself, so the pollen from inferior varieties could not fall upon the silk and check the upward tendency of the new variety. By doing this year after year his four-eared variety was certain.

"Hey, Joe!" called a countryman one day, reining up his team. "I want to get some of that corn for seed; will you sell it?"

"Yes, sir, after it has been measured by the committee. Can't touch it until then."

"All right; I want some. What do you ask for it?"

"Two dollars and a half a bushel for selected seed."

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"Sufferin' Moses; that's mighty steep, Joe!"

"Yes, and it's mighty good corn, too. It will make three times as much as you have been getting, with the right treatment."

"Well, I reckon it's wuth it. Put me down for two bushels, and I'll norate the news around that you'll sell for that price."

CHAPTER IX

THE last week in July brought the first open cotton-boll. There were hundreds of others cracking, ready to burst with the beautiful snow-white mass of fiber.

Joe remembered reading that the absence of trash, grit, or discolorations in cotton was worth several dollars a bale. He recalled how his father and the other farmers would do—wait until nearly the whole crop had opened before starting the picking. The lowest limbs of the cotton-stalk matured their fruit first; and often the wind or rain would cause the cotton to fall to the ground, to be beaten into the dirt, discolored, filled with grit and sticks and leaves.

Then the picking would go forward in a rush; the sacks the pickers carried would be emptied right on the ground at the ends of the rows, and the cotton scooped up from there with a shovel, a pitchfork, or in armfuls and thrown into an open wagon-bed. Then some one, often with muddy feet, would tramp the loose cotton in the wagon, inflicting more dirt and discolorations.

Joe determined his cotton should be handled

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differently. There was an abandoned negro cabin near the field; he swept it out twice, then with a pine-top dusted it thoroughly. He collected all the empty oat, corn, and meal sacks about the place, turned them inside out and shook them until there was no dirt or dust left in them; these he piled in the cabin ready for use.

He got Mrs. Weston to sew a strip of stout bed-ticking across the mouth of a fifty-pound meal sack so he could sling it across his shoulders, the open mouth of the sack at his left side, ready to receive the cotton as he picked it. Then he waited for more cotton to open.

He went through the prize acre of corn and pulled the fodder off as high as he could reach. It was rather dry by this time, but he thought a dollar or two could be made in that way to cut down the expense of the acre. He got two hundred good big bundles of fodder, which Mr. Somerville sold for him at two cents a bundle—that meant four dollars clipped from the expense-account.

By this time enough open bolls gleamed white among the cotton plants to make it worth while to start picking. Slinging his sack over his shoulder, Joe began systematically going down one row and up another. When he came to an open boll, he grasped it near the stem with

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his left hand, then with thumb and first three fingers of his right pulled the fluffy cotton from the flaring mouth of the boll.

He had never noticed before how much a green cotton-boll was like a green hickory-nut husk, only larger, and the boll opened at the outer end when ripe very similar to a chestnut burr after the frost has fallen upon it.

When he filled the sack he carried, it was emptied directly into one of the oat sacks he had provided, and the cotton never touched the ground. Each bit of dead leaf or stem or hull of the dried boll was picked out, and nothing marred the whiteness of his product. As each oat sack was filled he tied the mouth of it with stout twine, and stowed it away in the dry cabin.

In a week he had picked enough to make a bale. The sacks were loaded into the wagon, and a neighborhood gin-owner was induced to raise steam and gin the cotton for him.

The cotton was dumped into a hopper; then it was conveyed to the gin—an arrangement of round, small saws with fine teeth, set so closely together on a revolving shaft that the seed could not pass between the saws. A roller kept throwing the cotton against the battery of saws, about five feet long, and the swiftly revolving saws would catch the lint growing to each cotton-seed. The result was that the seed could not pass the



"THAT'S THE EARLIEST BALE I'VE EVER SEEN IN THIS COUNTY"

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saws, but the lint was yanked off in a jiffy, and the seed fell into a trough below. Behind the saws was a "brush" which collected the lint from the saws, and it passed over a set of rollers in a continuous web or "bat" and fell in loose folds into a great box below the gin-stand.

When all had been ginned, a big lid with a screw above was let down into the box where the fluffy "bat" lay, fold upon fold. The screw was tightened until the cotton was mashed to about one-tenth of its loose size; rough jute bagging was wrapped about it, and six thin iron bands or "ties" placed about the bale to hold it in shape. The "press" was opened—and out rolled Joe's bale of cotton!

"By jinks, that's the earliest bale I've ever seen in this county, and I've been ginning here twenty-five years!" remarked the owner of the gin. The bale was hoisted onto the scales and weighed.

"Mighty near standard—four hundred and ninety pounds; only ten more and you would have had a standard bale."

Joe sacked his cotton-seed, and, refusing an offer from the ginner at the rate of fifteen dollars a ton for them, to sell to a cottonseed-oil mill for crushing purposes, took them back home to sell for seed and for his own use.

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The new bale of cotton was hurried to town. At the cotton-warehouse a hole was cut in the side of the bale by the weigher, who certified the weight and pulled a sample of the lint from the hole he had made. This was wrapped in a piece of clean manila paper, and Joe and Mr. Somerville sallied forth to sell the cotton.

The first buyer they went to could scarcely believe his eyes—that a bale had been produced three weeks before cotton was expected to come on the market. He took a lock of the fiber between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. Grasping the ends of the lock with the similar fingers of his right hand, he pulled steadily.

It parted, and in each hand he had a lock of tolerably straight cotton. Repeating the process five or six times, he had every strand straightened out; and, placing the two pieces together, he went to the stronger light by the window and examined it.

"This is a new cotton in this neighborhood," he said. "The staple is about an inch and an eighth. The best we get around here is an inch. It's mighty nice and clean—if the bale is all like this."

"Every bit, sir. I handled it so it would be clean," said Joe.

"What 'll you offer, Dan?" inquired Mr. Somerville.

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"Well, New Orleans spot cotton is quoted to-day at twelve cents a pound for middling; this, however, classes as middling fair, a grade or so better. On account of the staple and cleanliness of the cotton I'll give you twelve and a half."

"Too low for that grade," said Mr. Somerville.

"I'll make it thirteen," urged the buyer.

"Write your bid on the sample." The buyer did so and signed his initials.

The next buyer raised his offer half a cent a pound. The third and last buyer in town was the representative of a great firm of New Orleans factors.

"I think our farmers ought to be encouraged to grow better cotton and handle it cleanly and properly, as you have, young man, and get it on the market earlier. I'll pay you fourteen cents."

"You've sure bought a bale of cotton," said Mr. Somerville. "Here is the warehouse receipt and weight."

The buyer made a calculation.

"Bale of four hundred and ninety pounds at fourteen cents comes to sixty-eight dollars and sixty cents. Here's your check. Come around again, son; glad to have met a progressive farmer like you."

"Well, Joe," said Mr. Somerville, "that's

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doing a heap more than the folks around here. A bale to the acre is what they make up in the Delta, and that's about the richest land in creation."

"Yes, sir, it's pretty good," said Joe, as he made out a deposit-slip for the check at the bank, "but I reckon I can get another small bale off that acre when all the top bolls open."

"Great Scott! Say that again, will you?" Mr. Somerville and the cashier stared at him in amazement.

"You're joking, aren't you, Joe?"

"No, sir, I'm not. Drive out there and see for yourself."

"Well, this certainly does beat the Dutch!" Mr. Somerville whistled. "Two bales to the acre—well, well, well!"

It was three weeks and a half longer, though, before all the top bolls opened and Joe got his second bale. It was small, barely four hundred pounds, and the market had tumbled to ten cents by the time he took it to the buyer who got his first bale. On account of the excellence in the staple and freedom from trash he paid eleven cents for it, and Joe banked forty-four dollars. The total of one hundred and twelve dollars and sixty cents for one acre of cotton was entirely satisfactory; moreover, there was



PICKING COTTON IN THE SOUTH

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forty or fifty bushels of seed he could sell for planting at a dollar a bushel, easily.

The next thing was to get the potatoes on the market. They were plowed up—a hundred and forty bushels at sixty cents brought \$84.00, which, added to the amount of the truck on that acre, made \$215.00. A hundred bundles of fodder from the Mexican June corn at three cents brought \$3.00 to be added to the oats acre, and seventy bushels of the June corn sold at seventy cents brought \$49.00; total for the acre of oats and June corn, \$64.00, with a crop of turnips yet to be heard from.

The cow-pease he did not count, as he let the vines mature the pease for seed, as pease were scarce and expensive, and he planned to plant more of them next year.

Thus far receipts had been: cotton, \$112.60; vegetables and potatoes, \$215.00; oats and corn, \$64.00; total, \$391.60, without considering the competitive corn acre or the cotton-seed on hand.

CHAPTER X

OCTOBER fifteenth the committee came out to measure Joe's corn. The three gentlemen took a standard bushel measure and a standard scale, filled the measure by pulling the corn from the stalks themselves; then weighed it and made their calculations.

Joe had made one hundred and eighty-eight bushels of corn on one acre at a cost of twelve dollars and thirty cents!

The committee took his record-sheet, where he had faithfully put down everything he had done in connection with the crop, how much he had spent, how many times and the dates of working, how much and what fertilizer and when and how applied, verified his calculations, certified their findings, signed it with Joe, and forwarded it to the County Superintendent of Education.

Joe now began to gather his corn. The stalks he had marked for seed he got first; beautiful, perfect ears they were. Leaving a thin shuck upon these ears, he put them in sacks and suspended them from a hook in the ceiling of the attic so mice and rats could not get at them.

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The three precious ears from the stalk showing the beginnings of a fourth ear, reserved to experiment with, he slipped each in a quart preserve jar, clean and dry, and screwed the top on tightly.

There were twelve bushels of "nubbins"; these he began to feed to the pigs, now great big fellows. He also gave them the Mexican June nubbins and the small, unsalable sweet-potatoes left in the field. One could almost see those hogs putting on fat.

Joe went over his prize corn and culled out fifty bushels, mostly from the stalks bearing the two perfect ears and nubbin. He sold the fifty bushels for two and a half dollars a bushel. The ten best ears he saved to exhibit at the State Fair. The sale of the seed-corn brought in one hundred and twenty-five dollars.

A few days after he had disposed of the fifty bushels a man came to him wanting some seed-corn.

"Haven't any more," said Joe.

"My gracious, Joe, you ain't sold all that hundred and eighty bushels a'ready, have you?"

"Oh, no; I've saved five bushels for seed for dad and myself—money couldn't buy that. I've sold fifty bushels of selected seed, and I've culled twelve bushels of nubbins. No, I've got a hundred and eleven bushels of corn yet."

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"Well, I'll take a bushel for seed."

"I'm not willing to let it go for seed. It is not the best; that is gone. Corn—just common, ordinary corn—is worth seventy cents. I'll sell it all to you at that."

"Ain't it good for seed?" queried the man, in astonishment. "Ain't it outen that same patch?"

"Yes, but that don't make it good seed-corn, or corn that I will guarantee to make what mine did with the same treatment. The fifty bushels of selected seed I did guarantee."

"Oh, shucks! The commonest stalk in that patch of yours is so much better than the rest of the corn raised around here that a feller is bound to do better with it. Gimme four bushels at seventy cents."

"All right—with the understanding that I'm not putting it out as seed I can vouch for."

The news was bruited around that Joe Weston was selling his fine corn at common-corn prices, and in two weeks he had not a bushel left. To each buyer he explained the difference between field selected seed and that which he could not guarantee. Every buyer reasoned as the first one did, and bought.

November first Joe went to town, taking the \$77.70 for the corn. Added to the \$125.00 he had got for seed, it made a total of \$202.70 for the prize acre.

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He was a bit worried as to whether he had acted fairly by Mr. Somerville in refusing two dollars and a half a bushel for the corn. The old merchant heard him through, then, placing his hands on Joe's shoulders and looking him straight in the eyes, he smiled.

"Son, don't you suppose I've heard of this long ago? And don't you suppose I was proud of you for acting with such scrupulous honesty and good faith with your customers? I've got plenty of money, Joe, in moderation, and I'd rather have had you do just exactly as you have done than to have some one give me a check for a thousand dollars."

"I'm—I'm much obliged sir; it just seemed right, and I was going to pay you the difference out of my part if it was wrong."

"Well, I wouldn't have taken it. Whenever anything 'seems right' to you, my boy, you go ahead and do it. Your ideas are straight."

Mr. Somerville had figured up accounts with Joe's father. Mr. Weston had also realized well from his cotton and corn; but, not taking the care Joe had, his yields were not half as large per acre, still they were treble what he was accustomed to make.

"Well, I've come in to settle up and see about that bet you made that you 'n' Joe'd make more

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off your four acres than I would off'n twenty-five!" he said.

It was a different Tom Weston that confidently challenged Mr. Somerville from the morose, surly, envious, whiskey-drinking ne'er-do-well of the year before.

"Now, look here, Tom; I didn't mean in competition with a brand-new Tom Weston. I meant that no-account chap we used to know."

"There you go now, trying to crawfish! Be a little sport now and stand the racket!" laughed Tom, who was enjoying the situation hugely.

"Make him stick to it, daddy!" advised Joe.

"Well, wait until that prize money is decided—"

"No, sirree! We weren't talkin' about no prizes; we were considerin' straight farmin' an' sellin' stuff off the ground—"

"That's right, daddy. We didn't know anything about any prizes when he said that. Don't let him out-talk you!"

"Well, we'll have a show-down, then. Joe and I have taken in to date a total, counting twenty dollars' worth of turnips sold, of six hundred and thirteen dollars altogether."

"Gee whiz, that's farmin' some, I tell you! I thought I had you beat world without end, amen—"

"Well, we have some cotton-seed and some

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cow-pease that will add something—and pay all expenses.”

“We won’t count them, as that is part of our outfit, or our ‘operating capital,’” said Joe.

“All right,” said Mr. Somerville; “what did you make, Tom?”

“Six hundred and sixty dollars!”

“Beat us forty-seven dollars, by George!” answered the merchant. “Well, Tom, old hoss, I’m mighty near as proud of you as I am of Joe—proud of him for a fine partner and you for a fine man that’s coming to your senses. I’ll gladly pay the bet.

“Mr. Jones!” he called to a clerk. “Take these gentlemen over to the clothing department and fit each of them with the best hat in the house and charge to my account.”

After the hats had been got Mr. Somerville and Tom Weston and Joe walked over to the office of the County Superintendent of Education, and found that official in.

“Look here, Professor. When are you—” began Mr. Somerville.

“Just got the last report in this morning. I tell you it was a job getting returns from the fifty-eight boys in this county.”

“Well, got any news for us?”

“Yes, I have. Mr. Joe Weston, I want to congratulate you now. I will announce in the

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paper to-morrow that you have won the first prize for this county."

"Wh—who was next?" gasped Joe.

"Oscar Henderson; but he did not come within ninety bushels of you. Really, you have done remarkably well, amazingly well, and you ought to stand a good show for the state prize.

"I'm calling a public meeting at the courthouse next Wednesday to award the prizes, so you better be on hand."

When they got outside of the door Mr. Weston shook hands with Joe solemnly.

"Son, I'm powerful proud of ye!" was all his father could say.

CHAPTER XI

“WELL, by gracious, we beat 'em!” exclaimed Mr. Somerville as they reached the street. He was really more excited than Joe was. “Come on over and get that suit of clothes and outfit I promised to the winner.”

“Mr. Somerville, I think that suit ought to go to Oscar Henderson. You and I were partners on this farming business, and, somehow, I believe it would be best—”

“There you are, right again! Of course there's no harm in your taking the suit, but I reckon it *would* be better to give it to the next highest man. I'll go right back in there and tell the professor about the suit for Oscar Henderson.”

“I'm glad we did that,” said Joe as Mr. Somerville came out.

“I am, too; but I am going to give you a suit anyway, myself.”

Joe's father cleared his throat awkwardly.

“Mr. Somerville, I—I want to give Joe them clo'es myself. I've been a powerful poor daddy to a mighty fine son, an' I ain't never done

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nothin' much for him. He's made a little man out of himself in spite of me, an' I've got a little money this year for the first time—by sorter follerin' after his lead—an' I want to show that I got *some* intrus' in him, anyway."

"Well, now, that's all right, and I'm glad to resign in your favor, Tom."

"I believe I'd rather have daddy give 'em to me, Mr. Somerville. We are gettin' to be mighty good pardners now, ourselves," smiled Joe.

"You bet we are," delightedly said Tom Weston. "I've got the best boy in seven states—an' I'm just findin' it out."

"When do you reckon we'll hear from the state prizes and those fertilizer prizes?" asked Joe.

"Oh, not until some time late in December. They've got to go over the returns from eighty counties and figure it all up, and I saw in a newspaper the other day that there were over four thousand boys competing in this state."

"I don't suppose I stand any chance on that," said Joe.

"Pretty long odds," remarked his father.

"There's no telling; it's possible, but not likely. I would not get my hopes up on that, Joe, if I were you. This is doing well enough for one year." Mr. Somerville was trying to prepare him for the possible disappointment.

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"I certainly did want that Washington trip, and to see things up there and talk to the boss man in this agricultural business."

"Well, son, maybe next year, with what you've learned this year, an' havin' your ground already in good fix, you can beat 'em to it."

"We are carrying on like I'd lost," laughed Joe. "The thing isn't decided that I have lost yet."

"'Nothin' like bein' prepared,' as the old maid said what kept her weddin' clothes ready fifty years in case some feller would ask her," replied Tom Weston.

"What'll you take for that poor old place we are living on, Mr. Somerville?" asked Joe, after a few moments' silence, when the three had returned to the store.

"Let's see. There's eighty-six acres all together—"

"Wouldn't you sell half of it?"

"No, couldn't do that, Tom. You know how it lies; it could not well be divided. Then the part back from the road I did not sell you could not be disposed of at all."

"Well, what'll you take?"

Mr. Somerville's eyes twinkled.

"Since you and Joe have made such crops on it this year, it's worth a heap more—"

"Now, that's what I call a dog-mean trick!" laughed Joe.

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"But, as I was going on to say, I'll not tack on that extra five dollars an acre."

"What's the best you'll do on about four years' time?"

"I'll sell the eighty-six acres and throw in the house and barn for twenty dollars an acre."

"One thousand seven hundred and twenty dollars! That's a heap of money to a feller that ain't got none hardly."

"That's very reasonable, Tom."

"Yes, I ain't disputin' that, but you see I only made six hundred and sixty dollars. My account with you is forty dollars, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm agoin' to pay you back that sixty dollar bonus you gave me on Joe's time—"

"No, Tom, I don't want—"

"Yes, sir; I am. That's an investment for myself—self-respec'. As for that hundred you paid me for Joe, why, a trade's a trade, an' you made money on it."

"More than doubled my money."

"Well, that leaves me with five hundred and fifty dollars. Then I owe you a hundred and fifty rent; that leaves three fifty. I want to keep a hundred cash to run on, so's I won't go in debt, and to buy me a start of good hogs and some chickens with; an' that only leaves me two hundred I could pay cash on the place."

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"That's a pretty small payment, Tom—"

"Look here, Mr. Somerville," said Joe, who had been an interested listener; "I think I'll just change my plans some. Seems to me paying rent's a waste of money, and the first thing folks ought to do is to get some solid ground of their own under their feet."

"No doubt about that, Joe; but business is business."

"I know that, and I'm going to talk business. Daddy, if you'll fix that place up so mother and Annie will have a home as long as they live, in case anything happens to us, and then give me half of what's made on it after it's paid for, I'll pitch in and help pay for it."

"Why, son, I don't want to take your money."

"It ain't that, daddy; it's investing it. Mr. Somerville got three hundred and seven dollars, half of what I made this year, straight farming. I can make that again next year, and more, for I've got some experience now. You pay him one hundred and fifty dollars' rent; there's over four hundred and fifty dollars that we could pay on the debt next year and still be in as good fix as we are right now. Four years of that would give us a clear title to it."

"That's so," assented Tom Weston.

"What do you think of the plan?"

"It's all right."

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"Very well, then, Mr. Somerville, we'll trade. I get seventy-five dollars prize-money, which, added to my three hundred and seven dollars, gives three hundred and eighty-two dollars. Out of the eighty-two I want to pay you for that pig I was telling you about, then the rest I am going to keep to buy fertilizer with and pay for help and buy some stock—"

"What sort of stock, Joe?" asked the old gentleman, curiously.

"Little pigs and calves and yearlings. I can pick them up cheap and raise them for almost nothing, and make some money that way."

"That's a good idee," said Tom Weston. "Folks in town here will sell good blooded calves cheaper to a person that's goin' to raise 'em than to a butcher to kill."

"Well, I'll have three hundred dollars I'll put with dad's two hundred, and we'll pay you five hundred down on the place."

The three of them went to a lawyer's office, and papers were drawn up. The contract provided that the title to the place was to be vested in a trustee for Joe and Annie; that Mrs. Weston and Annie were to use it as a home as long as they lived, if they desired; and that Joe, after all debts due on the place were paid, was to have one-half the income. Joe and his father also bound themselves each to place in the bank

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every year fifty dollars for the benefit of Mrs. Weston and Annie as an old-age and "rainy-day" fund, and to keep it at interest for them. The money was paid, and the kindly old merchant shook hands with them.

"I'm sorry the planting firm of Weston and Somerville has dissolved. I've made money out of it; but I've done more than that—I've made two rattling good farmers where there wasn't any before, and the influence of Joe's work is worth I don't know how many thousands of dollars to this county," said the retiring senior partner.

As Joe and his father rode home it seemed a new world to them.

"By the way, daddy, I've made something on the trade, too. We got my 'farm' fenced, all right, and there's that fifty bushels of cotton-seed I can sell. I'll have more money to run on than I thought I would."

"Well, Joe, we've shore got to hustle now and do some farmin' to get that place paid for; but, thank God, she's ours, an' we'll come out all right."

CHAPTER XII

THERE remained now only one thousand two hundred and twenty dollars to pay on the place. After discussing their affairs all the way home, when Joe and his father unhitched the team and started to the house, Tom Weston handed Joe the paper the lawyer had prepared, which insured a home to the two women-folk.

"You hand it to her, Joe—it's your doin's more'n mine," he said.

Joe thought of a little speech he would make, but at the supper-table he forgot all about it, and merely poked the paper at his mother.

"There's a home for you and sis," was all he could say.

As his mother read, tears of happiness welled from her eyes, and she threw her arms about their necks.

"Oh, I'm proud of my two boys, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart, but the dearest thing to me is that you two are beginning to understand each other and are such good comrades."

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"We are sure enough pardners now, mother, ain't we, Joe?"

"Yes, sir—in every way."

"An', mother, when we get this place paid for we're agoin' to build a sure enough nice house on it, with lots of closets an' sich, an' big piazzers, an' all painted nice, an' a lightnin'-rod on it, too."

"That will be fine; but, Tom, I love every log in this dear old place, and I don't want you and Joe to put yourselves under a big strain on that account—let's get something ahead first."

Joe and his father lost no time getting the land in shape for next year, and followed the method Joe used the year before. All the barnyard fertilizer was now carefully scraped up and saved, leaves and trash hauled and put into the soil as a permanent investment. Link Washington was hired regularly now, and never a day passed that the three of them did not do a solid day's work. The place began to take on an entirely new aspect.

Joe sold the pigs for his mother and Annie—forty-three dollars for the two—and he and his father insisted that Mrs. Weston use every cent of it for herself and Annie. They could not keep her from buying a nice tie and a dozen linen handkerchiefs each for "her boys," as she called them, and even Link was made happy with a

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green-and-blue tie and a pair of bright red suspenders.

Mr. Weston took the wagon one day, when they had about caught up with work, and vanished down the road toward the swamp. When he returned he had four splendid young magnolia-trees, a great clump of yellow jasmine roots, and two fine young crab-apple trees.

"Gives a feller a different feelin'—don't it, Joe?—to own land. Now, I never cared about fixin' up this front lawn before, but now it's ourn, why, I want to make it pretty."

"I'm glad you got those crab-apples," said Joe, as he tramped the dirt about one of the trees where it had been set. "I think the blossoms in spring are just about the sweetest of any."

"Well, when that yellow jasmine gets to runnin' over the front porch it'll be hard to beat. And the magnolias'll look pretty fine, won't they?"

"You bet. Now if we'll just get some woodbine to run over that old oak stump, and a lot of those yellow jonquils to go on each side of the front walk, we'll be fixed. I think we ought to name this place, too."

"That's a good idee. What'll we call it—'Prize Acre Farm'?"

"No, I don't like that. How's 'The Advance Farm'?"

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"That's all right; if mother and Annie like it, she goes."

"I think I'll ride over this afternoon and see Jim Sullivan."

"What for?"

"I heard Jim was trying to sell off everything he has; says he's going to Texas—a man ain't got no chance in this country." Joe cast his eyes around at his father.

"Jim Sullivan's a lazy, trifling, whiskey-drinkin' liar, that's all I've got to say about it," responded Tom Weston, emphatically. "An' I reckon I ought to know, for I've proved it."

"Well, if he's going to sell those pigs off cheap I'll buy 'em, for it's a good stock of hogs."

"Yes, and while you're about it you better buy the old sow, too; she's a good mother to them pigs, mighty reliable."

Down the road a boy was approaching on horseback at a lope. He reined at the gate and called:

"Joe, here's a note Mr. Somerville sent you!"

Joe was alarmed, and could not imagine what it was as he tore the envelope open. A yellow telegraph envelope fell out.

DEAR JOE,—(wrote Mr. Somerville),—Here's a telegram which came for you this morning. Of course the company does not deliver messages in the country, so I put this chap on a horse and sent it out. Hope it is good news.

Your friend,

J. SOMERVILLE,

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With trembling fingers Joe opened the message, and the typewritten words swam before his eyes. It was from the State Superintendent of Agriculture.

"Congratulations. You win state championship by margin of five bushels and two dollars less expense. Four thousand two hundred contestants. Also awarded nitrate and fertilizer prizes. Report my office thirtieth for trip to Washington."

His father read the message over his shoulder, and as both finished they grinned foolishly at each other and stood there shaking hands.

"Well, by gum!" said Mr. Weston. "Well, by *gum*!" He could think of nothing else to say, and remarked, "Well, by gum!" again.

"There's two hundred more to slap on this place!" said Joe, as his wits came back to him. "We'll only owe a thousand then!"

"Well, by *gum*!" wonderingly replied his father. Then he grabbed Joe by the arm.

"Come on and let's go tell the gals about it!"

"Son, when you get to Washington and shake hands with the President," said Mrs. Weston, pausing a moment to look at him as she packed his suit-case for the trip, "you just remember there's an old country-woman 'way down here in a split log house that thinks you're a sight bigger man than he is. Don't you ever forget that!"

CHAPTER XIII

JOE and his father were riding homeward from the railroad station. Joe's trip to Washington as the champion corn-raiser of his state was over.

As they rounded the shoulder of the hill and saw the little farm home in the bright morning sunshine Joe's face wreathed in a smile.

"You know," he said, earnestly, "I can understand that song 'Home, Sweet Home' a heap better now. There *is* 'no place like home.' It was mighty fine and all that in Washington, but I'm sure glad to be back."

"I'm proud to hear ye say that, boy!" answered his father. "I was a bit fearful you'd come back here dissatisfied, an' maybe after a while go away an' leave us—"

"Not a bit of it!" said Joe, stoutly. "I've come back with the idea of sticking right here and making this the best farm in the state."

"Well, hooray for that!"

"I mean it, too. I've got to have a lot more schooling, but I'm going to mix it in with my work."

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"So you think you'll stick to farming, son?"

"Yes, sir."

"After seein' all the government at Washington I'd 'a' thought you'd want to be a lawyer or somethin'?"

"I did think of that before I went there, but the President took me to the window and pointed out the Capitol and the Treasury and post-office buildings and some others.

"You think all this is great, don't you, Joe?" says the President.

"Of course I do," says I.

"Which is the greatest, these things or that which makes them possible?" he asked, looking hard at me.

"The cause of 'em, of course—that which makes 'em possible," I told him.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked me. I told him I reckoned it was the people.

"Yes, the people, but particularly the farmer. The whole structure of government is founded on him, for people must eat before they are governed. I think a good farmer is just as valuable as a good Senator!" he said."

"Well, I declare!" exclaimed Mr. Weston. "I had no idee we farmers were that important."

"Me either," said Joe, "but right then I made up my mind to be a farmer, and a good one. I've got a heap more respect for farmers now."

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Annie spied them down the road and came racing to meet them. Mrs. Weston waved an affectionate greeting from the front gate. Joe rushed in and gave his mother a hug.

"It sure is fine to be home again and see you all. How's everything getting along?"

"Just fine! Chickens started to laying, and we've six little new pigs."

"An' a new calf named Spot!" insisted Annie.

"Come on in and tell us about your trip. Did you really see the President?" inquired Mrs. Weston.

"Yes'm, and a mighty fine man he is, too. We had a big argument—"

"What? You didn't argufy with the President, did you, son?" she inquired, in horrified tones.

"Yes'm, I sure did. He started it," sturdily answered Joe.

"Good gracious, I hope you didn't talk sassy to him, did you, son?" anxiously asked his father, who had entered the room in time to hear part of the conversation.

"Why, of course not, but we argued just the same. And he asked me to stay to lunch with him, and I stayed."

"Gr-eat Scott!" whistled Mr. Weston.

"How did he come to do that, Joe?" inquired his mother.

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"Well," laughed Joe, "the rest of the boys—champions of eleven other states, you know—won the trip as I did. They went on with one of the heads of the Department of Agriculture to take a boat-ride on the Potomac River. We had just been looking over the Capitol. Our Senator was mighty nice to me, too—"

"I know him," said Mr. Weston, proudly.

"Yes, sir, he told me to give you his regards, and he's going to send ma some flowers and bulbs from the Department. Well, as I was saying, the crowd was leaving the Capitol, and I said I'd rather stay and watch 'em make laws. The Senator said he'd look after me and see I got back to the hotel all right. That was about half past ten in the morning—the Senate and House don't meet until noon."

"That was powerful clever of him," asserted Mr. Weston.

"So we were walking through the rotunda, right under the big dome you see in the pictures, when we met another Senator. He came up and said:

"'Have you seen the President about that matter you promised to take up with him?' And our Senator said, 'No, by George, I forgot it, but I'll go right on to the White House now and see him.'"

"So we went down the long flight of steps

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you see in the pictures sometimes. Really, they're at the back of the Capitol; it faces the other way. Down at the head of Pennsylvania Avenue there were a lot of cabs and automobiles standing."

"Did you ride in one of them autos?" inquired Annie, hopefully.

"Yes, but not right then.

"'Ride or walk, Joe?' asked the Senator.

"'I'd rather walk,' I told him.

"'Me, too,' says the Senator. 'I ate too many buckwheat cakes for breakfast and I need the exercise,' and he laughed, and we struck out down the avenue.

"He stopped in a jewelry store to get his watch he left there to be fixed, and then he picked out a pair of cuff buttons and pays four dollars for them, and hands 'em to me.

"'Take those with my compliments, Joe, as a souvenir. They are historical. They are made out of steel from the battle-ship *Maine* that was blown up in Havana harbor, and which caused the war with Spain.'"

"Le's see 'em?" excitedly asked Mr. Weston. Joe exhibited the blue-steel burnished buttons, which he was wearing. "You sure ought to be proud of 'em. Are they actually made out of part of the *Maine*?"

"Yes, sir; no doubt about it, the Senator said.

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There was a certificate there from the Navy Department showing that some of the steel from the ship had been sold the jeweler, and another certificate from the manufacturer that the buttons were made of that identical steel, so I'm sure they're genuine."

"It's a present worth having!" said Mrs. Weston. "They're real handsome, too."

"Then we walked on up the avenue, and the Senator showed me a lot of interesting things. Then when we got to the end of the avenue we turned to the right and passed the beautiful Treasury Department building. It has rows of big stone pillars around it—mighty handsome. Then right on the other side of it was the White House."

"An' you went right in where the President lives?" inquired Annie, in awed tones.

"Sure. The Senator sent his card in, and we waited in a big waiting-room full of people. There were some other Senators there before us, and after they had gone in our turn came. Senators are always let in ahead of other folks."

"What's that for?" inquired Mr. Weston.

"I asked, and it's because they are supposed to be there on public business; and, then, a Senator is a very high officer in Washington. And after a while the man at the door motioned to us

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and we went out of the reception-room into the office of the President."

"Didn't it make you feel sort of scared?" asked Mrs. Weston, apprehensively.

"Well," laughed Joe, "I'll tell the truth; I *did* feel kind of shaky, because I didn't know what to do, but that passed in a minute just as soon as the President spoke.

"Why, howdy, Senator! Glad to see you! What can I do for you to-day? And is that your chap?" he says, looking at me.

"In a way he is," said the Senator. "He's one of my boys from down in my state—champion corn-raiser—won a trip to Washington. Mr. President, this is Joe Weston!"

"Mighty glad to meet you, Joe," says the President, just as friendly as anything, shaking hands with me. "Always glad to meet anybody who has done something worth while. And how much corn did you raise?"

"I told him.

"What?" he sort of yells. "You don't mean to tell me you raised that much corn on an acre of land?" And he looked at me like he thought I must be mistaken. So I pulled my certificate out of my pocket and hands it to him.

"Yes, sir, I did. Read that!" I says, and he read it through.

"Well, that is certainly fine!" he said, and

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slapped me on the back. 'It's really wonderful. How'd you do it?'

"'Followed the instructions of the Department of Agriculture from right here in Washington—the instructions they send out to the Boys' Corn Clubs.'

"'Do you know, Senator, I have rather lost sight of that branch of the work?' said the President. 'I must find out some more about it. Now, let's get through with your business; and suppose you leave Joe here to take lunch with me, and we can talk? I'll see he gets back to the hotel all right. It's about twelve now.'

"'Why, that's agreeable, if Joe wants to stay. How about it?' said the Senator to me.

"'Wish you would, Joe, and tell me something more about this Corn Club work,' said the President.

"'That suits me all right, and thank you, sir, for asking me,' I said. So the President and the Senator talked about some bill or other, and after a while the Senator told me good-by and said he'd see me again before I left for home. Then the President pushed a button on his desk, and the doorkeeper came in.

"'I will see nobody else this morning,' said the President. 'And send word to the house-keeper to have lunch for two up here, right away.'"

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"Well, I do know!" remarked Mr. Weston, in awed tones, taking a long breath.

"He seemed to have acted just like folks," commented Joe's mother.

"Yes'm, and one of the nicest gentlemen I ever saw. I forgot all about his being President or anything else except just a fine, friendly man. He made me feel right at home. So we got to talking about raising corn, and I told him how I did it—"

"You said somethin' about argufyin' with him?" inquired Mr. Weston, anxiously.

"I'm coming to that. And when I was telling about cultivating the corn he asked me what I did with the 'suckers' thrown out at the base of the stalk.

"Did nothing with 'em," I said.

"You ought to have pulled 'em off," says the President.

"No, sir; it would have been a waste of time and work," says I.

"That's not accordin' to reason," he answered, mighty positive. "If you pulled those suckers off, the strength they take goes into the main stalk and helps mature the corn."

"That's what I thought about it, too," I said, "but I found out that it really didn't matter."

"You must be mistaken," said the President.

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“‘I believe I’m right,’ I told him.

“‘How are we going to settle it?’ he asks, like he had me.

“‘I’ll leave it to the head of the Bureau of Plant Industry of the Department of Agriculture,’ I said. I knew I had him, for I had seen one of the bulletins from the Department that tests had shown that it really did not make any difference about the suckers.

“‘That’s fair; he ought to know. I’ll just call him on the ’phone and see what he says.’ The President called him up, and, sure enough, he told Mr. President just what I said, that it was not worth the time and trouble to take the suckers off.

“‘Well, you win!’ says the President, turning to me and grinning in a mighty good humor.”

“What do you think of that, pa?” wondered Mrs. Weston. “What else did he say, Joe?”

“He said it had taught him a lesson—not to be so sure he knew anything until he knew he knew it.”

Annie was growing restive under the talk, and was concerned with more material things.

“Where’d you and him go to eat your lunch—out under the trees? An’ why didn’t you have some dinner ’stid of just a lunch, an’ what did you have to eat?”

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"It really was what we call dinner, sis," laughed Joe, "but not quite so much of it. Those very busy people up there eat a snack in the middle of the day and call it a luncheon, and then at six o'clock, or along that time, they have what they call dinner—at the time we eat supper."

"I think it's very silly to change things up so. But tell me what do Presidents eat—cake and pie and ice-cream," persisted Annie, "like kings do?"

"I don't know what kings eat, sis, and I don't know what Presidents eat all the time, but I know for lunch we had some mighty good potato-soup, and some fine roast beef and mashed potatoes, and a dish of spinach and poached egg on it, and a glass of rich cream, and a big slab of apple-pie."

"How was the pie?" anxiously inquired Mrs. Weston.

"It was good pie," judicially admitted Joe, "but I don't think it was as good as you make, ma."

She gave him a hug, and her face was radiant the rest of the day. It was a comforting thought to her the balance of her years to think that she could make better apple-pie than the President of the United States had set before him.

"Anything else?" persisted Annie.

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"No, except the President said he liked turnip greens!"

"And when was it he told you that about the farmer?" asked Mr. Weston.

"Just before he sent one of the doorkeepers back to the hotel with me. And he gave me a picture of himself with his name written on it—I saw him write it. And the last thing he said to me was, standing there, with my hand in his and his other hand on my shoulder:

"‘Joe,’ says he, ‘just remember this, that a good farmer, a *real* good farmer and an honest man, is just as useful and occupies just as high a place in this country as President, Senator, or Congressman. Don’t forget that. Be proud of the fact that you are a farmer if you are a good one.’”

CHAPTER XIV

JOE returned from Washington on Friday. Sunday afternoon he was scrambling around in the closets and on the shelves of the attic room, hauling out old school-books and dusting them off.

"Whatever are you up to, Joe?" inquired Mrs. Weston.

"Just trying to get some books together. I'm going to start to school again to-morrow."

"But you studied those books last year—"

"Yes'm, and I don't know 'em, either. I'm going right back and make it up."

"Won't that put you in classes with a lot of boys much younger than you are?"

"I guess it will, ma, and I know the fellows will rag me something fierce about it, and maybe I'll have to fight about it, but right there I'm going because I belong there."

"I kind of hate for you to do it," mused his mother. "You ought to be able to go in higher classes than that?"

"Oh, I reckon I *could* keep up, but I'm trying to be honest with myself. I don't know my

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arithmetic, and I don't know grammar, and I don't know how to spell. I didn't study like I ought to have done when I was there before, so it's for my own good."

"What started you on such an idea, Joe?"

"The President. When he told me good-by he looked me right in the eyes and said, 'Whatever happens, always be honest and absolutely square with yourself.' So I got to thinking about it. I hadn't been honest with myself the last year I was in school because I skimmed, and it wasn't honest to the teacher, either. I'm going back and make it good."

It took a good deal of courage to go to the teacher and be placed in classes with boys three and four years younger than himself, but Joe took his medicine like a man. Of course, he was gayed, but he took it good-humoredly.

"That's all right. Go ahead, you fellows, and have all the fun out of it you can—I'm paying for not studying. If you'd tell the truth about it, a lot of you would be right in this class with me. Go ahead—I've got it coming to me, and it don't make me mad!"

He grinned amiably at their chaffing, and when the boys found he would not lose his temper over it, they let him alone.

The second week after he started to school the County Superintendent of Education came

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over to start the Boys' Corn Club again and to get ready for the approaching season. Somehow, there seemed to be an utter lack of enthusiasm among the boys. They did not applaud his utterances, and only a few of them went forward and signed the roll.

"What on earth is the matter with them?" whispered the superintendent to the teacher, consternation written all over his countenance.

"Goodness knows, but it is something; that is certain," she replied, in an undertone.

Joe Weston instinctively felt that he was in some way concerned in the refusal of the boys to join. He caught several of them looking at him out of the corners of their eyes and shifting their glances when he looked in their direction.

Then at recess he overheard a group of the boys talking. They did not know he was near. "Reddy" Haywood was holding forth, and the rest of them nodded approvingly.

"Ain't no use our goin' in that Corn Club—Joe Weston's goin' in. He's already won the state championship and knows how. What chance we got? No more'n a rabbit in a burning sedge field. I just ain't goin' in, that's what!"

"Me, too! Me, too!" echoed several others.

The whole situation was clear now. Joe Weston went to the principal and the County Superintendent.

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"I've found out what's the matter with 'em," he said. "When we take in, if you'll let me, I think maybe I can fix things."

Accordingly, after the bell rang and the school was seated Joe rose in his seat.

"Mr. Superintendent, I want to say a few words, if you please," he said, in a self-possessed manner. The superintendent nodded affirmatively and looked at the principal.

"The school will pay attention to Joe Weston," said the teacher, rapping for order.

"Mr. Principal, I find the boys of the school don't want to go in this Corn Club because they think I am going in, and because I have made a state record they think they will have no chance with me in it.

"I just want to say this, that I am going in the club, but I won't compete for the county prizes. And I won't compete for any of the state prizes if any of the boys from this county come near enough to my record this coming year to make it a competition between me and them. Is that fair enough?"

In answer a storm of applause greeted the words. Joe smiled with pleasure.

"I'm going in this club this year to benefit myself and try to learn something more. I raised a big crop of corn and won the state prize on amount, but that ain't the main thing. It

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is to learn how to raise a big crop at small cost. That is the business end of it. If it costs you in fertilizer and labor about what your corn is worth to make it, then you've had your work for nothing: it ain't a bit better than raising a small crop at little or no cost on poor land.

"Now I want to say this, that if there's any boy in this club who wants the benefit of what I've learned I'll gladly help him in every way I can. You fellows go on in, and if you can win, do it, and I'll be glad to see it. I'm working on other lines now; but, at any rate, I don't think it just fair to you boys to compete against you, and I ain't going to do it. That's all I've got to say."

There was another silence for a moment after Joe sat down, and the applause broke forth afresh.

"I think Joe has acted admirably and fairly," said the County Superintendent. "You boys have seen what he has done against more odds than any one of you will ever be called on to face. First, he has satisfied himself that he can make the ground produce largely, and now he's figuring on how to do so at the least cost. That is the lesson we want you to learn. Now the books are open. Who else will join?"

Every boy in the school marched forward and enrolled for the contest.

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Joe went ahead with his preparations on his own acre, the same land that he had used the last year. He had sowed it down in rye as a winter cover-crop, and to prevent washing of the soil, and at the same time to afford a winter pasture for the stock and pigs. The rye was to be turned under when the ground was first broken in the spring. Mr. Weston had planted six acres in oats, but proposed to let them mature, after having been grazed by the stock during the winter.

In his spare time Joe now hauled leaves, but since there was stock on the place, the leaves were not applied direct to the land. The cows and horses were bedded in the leaves, and a covered pen was built back of the barn into which the leaves and bedding from the stalls were thrown each day.

"Ain't no use in buildin' a fertilize'-pen, Joe," objected his father, when the subject was first mentioned. "Just pitch it out there under the eaves, an' the rain and water 'll help rot it."

"Yes, and over half its value will be running off in waste water toward the creek," said Joe. "The water will take most of the ammonia and a heap of the nitrogen and phosphoric acid and such out of it. No, le's keep it dry until we are ready to apply it; then it will not lose its strength.

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There's a government bulletin on the care of barn-yard fertilizer. Haven't you read it?"

"No, I ain't had time yet; I've got so much to learn an' so much to read. An' you know readin' is mighty hard work for me. I ain't had as much schoolin' in all my life as you've had a'ready."

Joe felt sorry for his father, who seemed so keenly conscious of late regarding his own limitations. Joe sought to make him feel easier.

"Well, it isn't strange you haven't read it—there are so many of them—but I have, and that's what it says about taking care of the fertilizer. Folks lose from twenty-five to sixty per cent. of the value letting it stay out in the weather."

"All right, then; let's fix a shelter for it."

"And I'll tell you what, pa," suggested Joe. "Let's go through that pile of bulletins and pick out the ones that will help us right now: read some one every night. While I study my lessons you read as much as you can on the bulletin. Then when I get through with the school-books I'll read aloud what you've been reading, and we'll talk about it as we go along?"

"That's just a fine idee!"

"We'll sort out that pile to-night and make a start."

Accordingly, after supper Joe and his father

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went through the armful of government bulletins and picked out about a dozen to form their course of study until summer. After they had finished the one on barn-yard fertilizers they took two evenings to review and discuss it.

"Tell you what, Joe," said Mr. Weston, the second evening, "that there bulletin has given me lots of idees. Now, we all know one of the biggest expenses in farmin' right is this here commercial fertilizer. Seems to me if we could find somethin' to take its place we could save a whole lot."

"That's just the thing we want to do: instead of paying the fertilizer-factories for it, do our own manufacturing."

"Sure, an' make the profit ourselves. You know and I know the commercial fertilizer is gone in a year. Maybe a little of the phosphate stays in the soil for the next year, but not enough to do any good. Got to buy again next year."

"That's so."

"Now I see by this here bulletin we've just read that an experiment showed that seven years after a piece of soil was treated with barn-yard fertilizer it showed effects of the stuff, as against a piece of the same land treated with commercial fertilizer. That showed no trace hardly after the second year."

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"Looks like the thing to do is to figure the way to get more barn-yard stuff and build the land up so it will stay built," commented Joe.

"That's just what I mean, son. Stop the outgo for the commercial chemical stuff."

"How are we going to do it?"

"It's goin' to be slow work. In the first place, we've got to have more cattle, an' we've got practically no money now. But we can do this: winter is on, an' folks will sell cattle cheap rather than feed 'em. We ought to be able to pick up a dozen or so half-starved little calves for next to nothing. We can get credit at the bank for a hundred dollars, an' I think we better put it in calves."

"Say!" observed Joe, "that's a perfectly fine scheme. I know where I can buy two five-months-old calves now for two dollars apiece!"

"Ah, I'll start to-morrow to bust up six or seven acres more an' put in more oats; it's late, I know, but they will make all right. That will give winter grazing and stuff to feed on, and straw to bed 'em in and turn under later. We can pull them calves through without much cost until grass comes out; the next summer put every foot of ground we can in peavine hay."

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"Pease are fine for the land—collect nitrogen from the air and store it on the roots in those little bumps—'nodules' the book calls them," said Joe. "Then the leaves that fall from the pea-vines help put humus in the land along with the decaying roots."

"So, with the oats and pea-vine hay and fodder we will be well fixed to take a big herd of cattle through next winter—and what nubbin corn we raise," said Mr. Weston. "We'll keep the cattle up at night, bed 'em in leaves an' straw, compost it, and we've got a good start on fertilizer. In two years more we ought to have those calves in prime fix for beef cattle and get fifty dollars apiece for 'em."

"That looks mighty fine," assented Joe. "Besides, the oats being grazed by the cattle will help the oats, and the land will get the benefit of what fertilizer is dropped there then, and that will amount to a heap."

"Then," continued Mr. Weston, "I figure that this next fall, instead of selling our cotton-seed, we ought to swap it to the oil-mill for cotton-seed meal and hulls. There's a heap of fattening stuff in the meal, and it forms about a fourth of these commercial fertilizers, and furnishes nitrogen. Mix the meal and hulls and feed it to our cattle. We get the benefit of the fattening for the beeves an' then have

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the rest of it with the nitrogen in it for the land."

"Say, you were late getting started, but you sure are farming like an up-to-date farmer now!" enthused Joe.

"Tryin' to make up for lost time, son. We'll have somethin' yet, you an' I. Well, as I was sayin', in this scheme we practically get our beef cattle for nothing, get the benefit of permanent fertilizer for the land, and ought to make a profit of sixty or seventy-five per cent. on each animal."

"It looks good," judicially admitted Joe.

"It is good, and it's horse sense, too. Why, if we just broke even on handling the cattle it would pay us, for the good we will get in fertilizer for the land and to stop the outgo for chemical stuff each year. But we'll make money on 'em, big money."

"If we keep planting pease, and filling the ground with the roots full of nitrogen, and planting cover-crops in winter and grazing it, and turning under stubble, and putting rotted leaves and straw and corn-stalks and stable cleanings mixed in this land, in five years we'll have the richest place in the county," continued Mr. Weston.

"Well, I'm going to go hunting for scrubby, half-starved calves," said Joe. "I'll ask all the

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boys at school if they have any to sell for cash, and you go on and get the money from the bank."

"All right, and first thing we know we'll have a fertilizer-factory here that will be paying us biggest sort of profits!" said Mr. Weston.

CHAPTER XV

JOE was on his way to school a few days later when he saw a boy about his own age approaching him on a nice bay pony. The boy was evidently a city youth, and, seeing Joe, he reined up.

"Hello!" he remarked, in a friendly tone. He was a nice, manly-looking boy, but very thin and pale.

"Hello, yourself!" answered Joe, stopping and sizing him up. Joe liked his looks, but thought he was remarkably puny in appearance.

"You're Joe Weston, the champion corn-grower, aren't you?" he said. Joe nodded. "I saw your picture in the papers, but I thought you were a heap bigger than you are. I've wanted to meet you."

"Much obliged," said Joe. "Who are you?"

"Excuse me for not telling. I'm Tom Ralston. Father bought that big old plantation of Major Dean's down the road about two miles. We've only been here a couple of weeks."

"Where you from?"

"Up North. I'm just over a spell of typhoid,

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and awfully weak. Then, mother is not strong, and we wanted to get away from the hard winters up there, so father bought this old house and plantation for a winter home. He can't stay here all the time, but he will come down and hunt and fish whenever he can get off. He's about worn himself out working. Owns a big factory."

"Well, I'm glad you-all have moved in the neighborhood, and hope you'll like it. Ever lived in the country before?"

"Never have, but I think it's fine, what I have seen of it!" said Tom, with enthusiasm.

"Come over and see me sometime. It's easier for you to come to see me than for me to go to your house; you've got a pony, and I have to hoof it or ride one of the work-horses."

"Sure will, and thank you for asking me. It's kind of lonely until one gets acquainted. How far you going?"

"'Bout a mile, to the school-house."

"Hop up behind me and I'll give you a lift. This pony rides as easy as a rocking-chair rocks. Come on!" He extended his hand. Joe placed one foot in the stirrup and vaulted up behind him. The pony was indeed a fine one. By the time they reached the school-house the two boys were well started on a friendship. Several

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of the boys at the school crowded about as they rode up.

"Say, fellers!" called Joe. "This is Tom Ralston. His folks bought the old Dean place, and just moved in. He's been mighty sick with fever an' ain't strong yet, but he wants to get acquainted. When you get a chance go over and see him."

"Wish you would," added Tom.

"Some of the gang will be over Saturday, sure," announced Reddy Haywood. Pleased to meet you. Won't you 'light, an' rest your saddle?" Reddy was doing the elegant as host for the school.

"No; much obliged. Got to go to town and do some errands for mother, but I'll come over once in a while at recess and see you fellows. Glad to have met you, and so long!" He waved a farewell, and the pony sped down the road.

The boys talked him over and decided he "would do." Several expressed the opinion that he looked sort of "sissy" and feeble.

"If you'd been in bed nine weeks with typhoid, you'd look just as bad," retorted Tom. "An' if I hear of anybody imposing on him until he gets strong enough to take care of himself they've got me to whip. He's a stranger an' a Yankee boy, and the decent thing is for us all to act like gentlemen an' make him welcome to our

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neighborhood like we'd appreciate his doing if we moved up in the neck of the woods where he comes from."

"Joe's right!" exclaimed Reddy Haywood. When these two leaders of the school agreed on a matter it was settled in so far as that crowd of boys was concerned.

In two weeks Tom had got strong enough to stand considerable exercise, with the daily horseback rides and the fresh, invigorating air of the country. He was very much possessed with the idea of going on a possum-hunt.

"I can fix that all right," assured Joe. "I'll see old Uncle Jeff Johnson—that old darky who lives up the road; he'll take us. He's got some good possum-dogs. I'll tell him to come and see you when the time is right, and we'll go. Old Uncle Rube that works here on this place of yours is a good hunter, too."

The next Saturday Joe rode one of the work-horses down to the Ralston place, and was explaining to Tom how he could teach Tom to be a good shot, when Uncle Jeff shuffled around the corner of the house.

"Mawnin,' young marsters! Hope I see's you well ter-day?" he saluted them, raising his hat. Uncle Jeff prided himself on his manners, as he belonged to one of the prominent families of the county before the war.

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"Very well, thank you," answered the boys.
"How's your health, Uncle Jeff?"

"Powerful porely, powerful porely. I has de rheumatiz an' de dyspepsy, but I'm thankful hit ain' no wuss. Jes' think of all de ailments I mout have en ain' got! Dat's whut I'm thankful fer."

"Hope you will get better soon," assured Tom.

"Thanky, suh, en I hopes yo' enjoys de same blessin'."

"How about the possums?" inquired Joe.

"Dat's persackly whut I come up hyar ter see yo' all erbout, Marse Tom. Yo' wuz a-talkin' erbout wantin' ter go possum-huntin', en ter tas'e er baked possum wid yam-'taters swimmin' in de gravy on de side."

"Oh yes, I'd love to do both."

"Well, now's de time."

"How do you know, Uncle Jeff?"

"Oh, I *knows*. De moon is in de fust quarter, jes' ernuff ter give er little light, en not ernuff ter th'ow er shadder. Er possum is er powerful cowardly varmint, en he won't feed on er bright moonlight night—his own shadder skeers 'im. An' den, hits sorter nippin' en frosty, en er possum ain' fitten ter eat less'n he be dressed en put on top of er shingle roof fer de fros' ter soak in 'im all de night."

"Oh, that's all foolishness! Why won't a

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refrigerator do as well? The object is to get the animal heat out of the carcass," answered Tom.

"Mout be foolish, but I wants ter ax yer one queschun. Who started dis yer business er eatin' possums—niggers, whut 'pen's on de fros', or w'ite folks, whut has dese hyar freezeraters—huh?"

"I don't know," admitted Tom, sheepishly.

"In *co'se* you dunno. Hit wuz de niggers, en dat's de way de niggers fixes possums. Can't nobody but er nigger cook er possum jes' right, neither. I'd as soon eat er dawg ez er possum cooked by any one else, en onless de fros' has soaked in 'im."

Joe had been an amused listener.

"That's a fact, Tom, about nobody but a darky knowing how to cook possums just exactly right. Why, Colonel Ainsworth, who lived down the river from here, got to speculating in cotton and made a whole lot of money. He undertook to put on a great deal of style then—had his house fixed over, and sent to New Orleans and got a French chef, and the first entertainment was a big possum supper to a lot of his cronies from New Orleans. You just ought to hear the colonel tell about it.

"That Frenchman didn't know how to cook possums, and he brought them in roasted, and

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swimming in cream gravy with a lot of chopped vegetables all over 'em, *à la* something or other. The colonel called him to the dining-room and asked him about it. Then the colonel got so mad at his dinner being ruined he grabbed a big fat possum by the hind-legs from the dish and slammed that chef over the head with it and ran him down the front steps trying to hit him again.

"The colonel said he agreed to pay that chef a hundred dollars a month, but any cook who couldn't fix a possum right wasn't worth two bits a year. He sent the chef back on the next boat, and sent for Aunt Venus, Uncle Jeff's wife, and she cooked the possums next day."

Uncle Jeff stood chuckling.

"I wuz dar. Yo' jes' oughter seed dat Frenchy bounce down dem steps. He wuz fat, an' de colonel he wuz fat too, a-makin' a lick at 'im wid every jump wid dat possum all smeared over wid cream gravy! He wuz de maddest w'ite man I ever seed. De guests ain' quit laffin' twell yit, I reckon. Hit shore wuz funny!"

"All right, have your way about the frost, Uncle Jeff," conceded Tom. "Only I want to help catch a possum, and eat it if it is cooked right."

"Now, *dat's* de way ter talk. Yo' leave de

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huntin' ter me en Unk' Rube, an' de cookin' ter Mis' Venus, en all we axes yo' boys is ter furnish de appertites en don' founder yo'se'fs."

"We can furnish the appetites all right," assured Joe.

"Well, right atter supper yo' all put on yo' ole clo'es, en me en Rube 'll git de dawgs en de res' of de fixin's."

Joe stayed to supper, and about half past seven Uncle Jeff sounded his horn as he came up the front drive, accompanied by four yelping dogs. Uncle Rube came from the rear of the house carrying in one hand a light, sharp ax, and a lantern in the other. Slung across his back and that of Uncle Jeff were bundles of very rich "fat" pine, cut in splints about the size of a finger and about four feet long. Each carried an empty sack wrapped about the cord that held the pine splints.

"What are those pine sticks for?" inquired Tom.

"Torches," answered Joe, who was an old hand at the game. "Take four or five of those long splinters, hold them together in your hand, and light the other end, and it makes the best sort of a light: harder the wind blows the brighter it gets."

"Whar we better go, Unk' Rube?" inquired Uncle Jeff.

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"I spec we stand a better chance over in dat big ole fiel' by de creek. Dey's some 'simmonses lef' on de trees yit down dar; I come thoo dar yestiddy en seed whar possums been feedin'. Den dey's plenty black haws down in de bottoms, en choke-berries en red haws too—dey's plenty er feed, en I bets we gits er possum er so."

"All right, lead on, le's be going somewhere!" said Joe, with impatience. Uncle Jeff sounded his horn; the dogs leaped joyfully with frantic yelps and sprang ahead.

The party cut through the stable lot, down through the lower pasture, and up the long slope of the hill where the old field lay on the other side. They walked single file into the mysterious night, Rube with the lantern leading, then the boys, and Uncle Jeff bringing up the rear. As they reached the crest of the hill they stood still a few moments while the dogs ranged in front of them. Directly one of the dogs broke into cry, joined by the others shortly.

"Uh huh! Hear dat? Done struck er trail erready!" exclaimed Uncle Jeff, in triumph.

"Hot trail, too," observed Uncle Rube. "We'll git dat ole possum in er mighty few minutes."

The dogs were making the silent woods ring with their musical notes as the two men whooped encouragement. The trail led directly down the

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long slope and into the sweet-gum flats near the creek.

"Makin' fer de swamp," said Uncle Jeff. There was a pause in the trailing cry of the dogs, and the long-drawn-out notes gave place to short, excited yelps.

"Treed, by granny—treed a'ready! Come on!" called Rube, striking a trot in the direction of the dogs and yelling encouragement to them so they would not desert the quarry and take up another trail.

Dancing about the base of a tall, slim sweet-gum tree were the four dogs, jumping up with forefeet on the trunk and baying in a frenzy of excitement.

"Dar he—dar he!" cried Jeff, in joy, peering up in the darkness. "Way up in de top. See 'im?"

Tom could merely see an indistinct blur against the starlight through the bare branches.

"I guess so. I see something!"

"Climb or cut?" inquired Uncle Rube, unslinging his bundle of splinters and making two torches, which he lit and gave the boys to hold. As the fat pine sputtered and flared the light disclosed two pin-points of green light shining from the dark object.

"Oh yes, doggone yer! Grinnin' at us, is yer? Thinks we ain' gwine git yer, does yer? Thinks

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yer too sharp fer us, huh? Gimme dat ax, Jeff. I'll have dat tree down 'fore yo' c'd git ter de fust limb climbin'."

Uncle Rube swung the ax, and in two licks it bit out an immense chip from the tree-trunk. Two more licks brought another, then another.

"Hole dem dawgs, now, Jeff. We don' want no chawed-up possum. Dis tree is trim'lin' now; two more licks 'll bring hit down!" cautioned Rube. Jeff slipped the twine through the collars of the four dogs. They were wild with excitement, for they knew what was coming.

"Look out, folkses; tree's a-fallin'!" sang Uncle Rube; and with a crash the tall stem fell. Almost at the same time Jeff was near where the top struck the ground, scuffling with the dogs, who had got tangled with his legs, and he was trying to keep his balance and handle the lantern at the same time.

"Turn dem dawgs loose—turn 'em loose, Jeff! My Lawd ha' mussy, ef we ain' let dat ole possum git erway. Turn 'em loose quick, befo' he c'n git far off!"

"Well, ain't he er slick un!" commented Jeff, as he finally got untangled from the cord holding the dogs, and they plunged excitedly into the brush of the tree-top, scuffling and sniffing in confusion. They lost several minutes in that way, then broke into full cry again, trailing up

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the hill, men and boys following as best they could. It was hardly five minutes after they took the trail the second time, but the party had traveled pell-mell over a quarter of a mile.

"Don' tell me dat ole possum ain' been hunted befo' dis!" panted Rube. "He's a-makin' time like er deer."

The dogs signaled that they had treed again.

"*Now* we got 'im! I ain' gwine take no mo' chances—dem dawgs kin have dey fun en chaw 'im too, if dey wants. I don' puppose fer no possum ter make me run merse'f ter death!" announced Uncle Jeff.

This time the quarry had taken to a tall blackjack about as large around as a man's leg.

"I'll hole de dawgs, Unk' Jeff—hit's yo' time ter cut de tree—but I sho is gwine ter let dem puppies in soon's hit nears de groun'."

"All right; jes' so yer don' let 'em loose en let de tree fall on 'em—dem's vallyble dawgs."

Tom and Joe stood holding the torches so Uncle Jeff could see to swing the ax. Directly came the preliminary crackling and swaying.

"Ready, now!" warned Uncle Jeff, as he hit the final lick and the tree majestically swayed and fell with a thunderous crash. A second

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before it hit earth Rube turned the dogs loose, and they were in the tree-top almost before it had settled from the rebound.

Men and boys ran forward, holding their lights aloft, and puzzled, too, for there was the liveliest scrap going on in those interlaced branches and twigs they had ever witnessed. The dogs were snarling and yelping and barking and biting; there were squeals and howls and growls, and every minute or so a dog would dash out, flapping a badly torn ear or bewailing lustily a bitten nose.

"Why, good gracious erlive, ef dat ain' er gre't big ole coon!" yelled Uncle Rube. "Whoopee! Sic 'im, Spot! Go ter 'im, Rattler! Sic 'im, dawgs! Sic 'im, boys—whooee!"

The dogs plunged back to the fray. The coon had about bested them in the thick branches, but on the second attack Br'er Coon made the fatal mistake of trying to get into the open. As he cleared the tree and landed in the grass there was another mix-up of flying claws and snapping jaws.

The coon lay flat on his back and fought with all four feet and his teeth. He was holding off the dogs and inflicting more damage on them than they were on him, until the dogs got down to team-work and would rush him two at a time on different sides. It was as pretty a

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team-play as ever a football game exhibited.

Finally Spot managed to get the coon by the throat, and the last heard of him was a shrill squeal as Spot shut off his breath and proceeded to shake the life out of him.

CHAPTER XVI

UNCLE Rube rushed in, pried the dog loose, and held the limp form up in the light, while the dogs, now they knew the sharp teeth and lancelike claws were powerless, seemed crazy to get at him.

"Oh, git down, git down, plague on you!" called Uncle Rube to the dogs. "Jes' like some folkses—ain' so anxshus ter fight long's de fightin's good en no trouble ter git took on, but w'en hit's all over en you knows dey ain' no mo' scrap yer gits powerful brave; an' I notices, too, dat de loudes' one of yer now is de one whut fit de leas' w'en his fightin' wuz needed en he c'd git ercommerdated all he wanted."

"Dat's er fine ole coon," remarked Uncle Jeff. "Lemme heft 'im—uh! Mus' weigh eighteen poun' at leas', en de hide ain' chawed a bit."

"Now, Uncle Jeff, you tan that hide good so Tom can take it back with him when he goes up North and he can have a real coonskin cap like Daniel Boone used to wear—just the thing for that cold country up there," suggested Joe.

"All right, Marse Joe; I'll fix de hide up nice.

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How would yer all like ter eat some er dis yer ole zip coon?"

"Like it fine. I've heard you colored folks talk about eating coon meat, but long as I've lived in the country I never tasted it. Want to try it, Tom?"

"Sure, I'll try anything once, anyway. You fix that coonskin up in good shape and you'll not lose anything on it, Uncle Jeff," said Tom.

"Yas, suh, I shill suttin'ly do my mos' power-fullest bes'," responded Uncle Jeff, in his grandest manner.

"Well, hyar we is nigh onto three miles from home, en nary a possum yit. We ain' gwine home twell we does git one," announced Uncle Rube. "Git dem no-count dawgs er yourn whut can't smell nothin' but braid en meat out ter scourin' dese woods, an' le's see whut dere is, Unk' Jeff!"

"To-oo-ot Too-oot! To-oo-ot! Hunt 'em up, boys! Whoopee, dawgs! Go git 'em, boys!" urged Uncle Jeff.

The dogs began circling the woods in ever-widening radius, noses to ground, hunting for a scent. "Well, suh, I would 'a' swore on er stack er Bibles er mile high dat wuz er possum in dat firs' tree," he continued.

"Me, too. But, Jeff, er possum jes' nacherally

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couldn' run as fas' as ole Br'er Coon dar in dat sack."

"Yeah, dat's right: coon sure kin cover groun'. Uh huh! 'Busin' my dawgs, wuz yer? Jes' lissen ter dat!" The dogs had opened cry excitedly again. "Dat's Spot, en when Spot tells me he's hit er possum trail I knows hit's de trufe. Rattler lies sometimes, en Blue too, en ole Drum but seldom; but Spot never does. Dar now—treed erg'in! Spot says so. Come on, hit ain' fo' hunnerd yards!"

This time the task was easy. The hard-pressed possum had been feeding on ripe black haws which had fallen to the ground, and had taken refuge in the nearest tree, a dogwood about as large around as a baseball bat. When the party arrived, there he was, perched about fifteen feet above them and grinning sardonically at the excited dogs below.

"Aw yes, durn yer, we got yer dis time! Come outer dat saplin'!" called Uncle Jeff, giving it a vigorous shake. The possum only grinned harder and wrapped his long tail tight about the main stem. Shake as they might, they could not dislodge him.

"Hyar, gimme dat ax!" cried Uncle Jeff. "An' hole dem fool dawgs; dey's almighty keen on chawin' up er pore varmint whut won't fight, sich as a possum, en we don' want no bruised possum to eat."

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"Well, didn' de dawgs git dat coon?" retorted Uncle Rube, resentfully, taking up for the dogs he had only a little while since been aspersing.

"Aw, ya-as, atter fo' of 'em pestered an' worried dat po' coon twell he wuz plumb tired out en couldn' hardly fight—"

"Oh, shut up that arguing and let's catch this possum!" called Joe.

"Dat's whut I says!" virtuously chimed Uncle Jeff. "Er pusson can't make er *re-mark* erbout er lot of no-'count nigger cur-dawgs whut's perclained ter be houn'-dawgs but whut Unk' Rube got ter start er argymint about dem vittle-holders—"

"Well, yer wuz 'flectin' on de dawgs whut wuz doin' dey bes'—"

"I wuzn't doin' nuffin' er de kine—dey's my dawgs en I kin say whut I thinks erbout 'em, can't I?"

"Here, for goodness' sake, give me that ax!" called Joe, taking it from Uncle Jeff's hand and swinging it against the sapling. A few licks brought the little tree to the ground. The dogs made a rush to get at the possum, but the leash held. The boys and Uncle Jeff ran to pick up the game.

"Why, he's dead!" exclaimed Tom. "The fall must have killed him!" The animal lay

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half curled in a limp mass, a set grin showing the keen teeth.

"Dead nuthin'!" laughed Uncle Jeff. "Dat's whut we calls 'possumin'. He does dat jes' ter 'stract yo' 'tenshun, den when yo' lows he's daid en don' watch 'im clost, up he gits en scoots fer de tall timber."

"He's nice en fat?" observed Uncle Rube, judicially, holding the possum up by the long, ratlike tail.

"Yeah, en er big 'un, too. Well, pop 'im in de sack en le's go home. Big coon en er big possum is ernuff fer one night."

When they reached the front steps of "Run-nemede Plantation" house, as the Ralston home had been known for seventy years, Uncle Jeff shouldered the sack that Uncle Rube had been carrying.

"Marse Joe, I'm gwine ter tote dis yere possum en coon home, en fix 'em so de fros' will fall on 'em ter-night, en den I'll git Mis' Venus—dat's mer ole lady—ter cook 'em es dey should be cooked, en I 'speckfully invites yo' en Marse Tom en his pa en anybody else yo'-all wants ter bring, ter mer house on de Pigeon Roos' road ter supper ter-morrer night."

"Colonel Jeff, present our compliments to Mis' Venus, and say we will be highly honored to accept," responded Joe, in exaggerated gravity;

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and with mutual good nights the party dispersed. Joe went in to spend the night with Tom.

At the breakfast-table next morning Major Dean was a guest. He had come over the night before to give Mr. Ralston some instructions. In truth, he found it hard to leave the old plantation, where he had lived most of his life, but he was alone in the world, save for a married daughter, who lived in the city. Wife and two sons had died, and he could not bear to live there with nothing but sorrowful memories, yet he hated to get away from the haunts of a lifetime. Now that Mr. Ralston and his family were on the place, the major made many excuses for coming around, and the Ralstons were very greatly delighted to have him. His old room was set apart for him in the tremendous house, and he was told to make himself as entirely at home as if he still was master there. It seemed to give him much happiness.

Tom and Joe told of the hunt, and the invitation to Uncle Jeff's house for that evening to eat baked possum and coon. Mr. Ralston was somewhat embarrassed and puzzled that Joe should take it as such a matter of course.

"You'll go with us, won't you, father?" inquired Tom.

"Well—er—I don't know about that," he

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responded, dubiously. He cast his eyes around at Major Dean.

"Why, certainly, go!" encouraged the major. "I'll go with you—it would hurt Uncle Jeff's and Aunt Venus's feelings mightily if we didn't." Mr. Ralston appeared more puzzled than ever, and Mrs. Ralston was thoroughly embarrassed. "What is it, Mr. Ralston? You're worried about something; out with it!" said Major Dean.

"I—I don't just understand about it," said Mr. Ralston. "I don't want to come down here and run contrary to the customs of the country and neighborhood, and I know you people of the South do not admit negroes to social equality, and ostracize folks who do so; yet here we are proposing to take supper at a negro's house. I can't understand it, and I'm afraid it will get the neighbors down on us!"

"It does appear inconsistent, doesn't it?" said the major, with a laugh. "Yet, when you understand, it is not. And I am going with you, and nobody can question what I do as being proper and according to the customs of the land."

"That is another thing that makes it harder to understand," said Mr. Ralston—"the very fact that you are going."

"Well, now, when we go down to Uncle Jeff's cabin the table is going to be set for us

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alone, and Jeff and his wife and Rube will wait on it. After we have finished they will eat. It is a compliment to their cooking that we come, and a bit of condescension on our part they appreciate greatly, but they never think of presuming on it."

"Oh, that makes it somewhat different." Mr. Ralston was plainly relieved.

"You see, Ralston, it is hard for an outsider to understand the ties that exist on these big plantations where they have been in one family for a long time. My father owned this place forty years; I've lived all my life on it until now, and I am sixty. Uncle Jeff was born on the place, and he is sixty-five; so was Uncle Rube, and he is sixty-two. When I was five years old my father gave Jeff to me, and we were raised together as playmates and comrades. He, being five years older than I, was responsible for me, my nurse and companion. And he was faithful to the trust always. Why, when I went to the front in the Confederate army, Jeff went with me as my body-servant, and we divided everything. When the army was reduced to the parched corn to eat, we divided that, too."

"Did Jeff fight?" inquired Tom, with a new respect for the old negro.

"I have heard that he did a bit of sharp-

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shooting while I was at the front on the firing-line. I couldn't prove it, but I do know that in a charge at Gettysburg a bullet got me—and I lay on the field unconscious for twenty hours, as near dead to be alive as any man ever got to be.

"Jeff was searching for me everywhere, and found me just as a burying-party was about to dump me in a trench with a lot of corpses and cover me with dirt. They thought I was dead, and there was nothing to indicate that I wasn't. Jeff got another negro, and they packed me two miles to a field-hospital, and then took me to a farm-house and nursed me until I could travel. Then he brought me home."

"That certainly was fine of him!" exclaimed Mrs. Ralston.

"So you see," continued the major, "there's nothing we would not do for Uncle Jeff and Aunt Venus, his wife. And when they were freed as slaves they would not leave, but stayed with us. And during the war, while the men were at the front, Uncle Rube stayed here and took charge of the other slaves and made a crop of cotton and corn every year—made the negro women weave cloth and knit socks for the soldiers, and generally kept things going."

"It is astonishing that they would be that faithful!" said Tom, wonderingly,

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"That was not only on this place, Tom," said Major Dean, "but on most of the plantations. And the last two years of the war, when all the ports were blockaded by the Federals and we could not get any cotton through the lines on blockade-runners to market in England and France, Rube made the crop anyway, baled it, and stored it in inaccessible places in the swamp, building platforms to put it on and covering the bales with a thatch of palmetto leaves.

"It certainly came in handy after the war, too," smiled the major. "Father had invested two hundred thousand dollars—every cent he had—in Confederate bonds. He was too old to fight, so he equipped a battalion at a cost of thirty thousand dollars and sent that as his substitute."

"He sure believed in the cause!" said Mr. Ralston.

"We all did, or we would not have been willing to give our lives and our property for it. So, when General Lee surrendered we lost a hundred slaves, worth from one thousand to thirty-five hundred dollars each. Most of them scattered and left, and when we had to make a start again we had no labor and no money.

"Well, sir, I came back and thought we were dead, flat broke. Then Uncle Rube showed us where he had four hundred bales of cotton

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hidden so the cotton confiscators could not find it. We shipped it to Liverpool, and got a dollar a pound for it, and each bale weighed five hundred pounds. It put us on our feet again."

"Well, I don't wonder you think a lot of those old darkies!" said Mrs. Ralston. "You ought to."

"With the crowd of whites and blacks that have grown up since the war most of the race antagonisms originate, and from them the friction comes. But our old-time negroes—we take care of them, and are glad to do it."

"I am glad to know that," said Tom. "And I never knew before how you folks down here regarded the old-time negroes—I mean just why you thought so much of them."

"Uncle Rube and Uncle Jeff are simply typical," said the major. "There were thousands like them all over the South. So we take care of them. I gave Jeff and his wife a deed to that place down there where they live, and pay them ten dollars a month; and I've set aside a fund to keep the payment up as long as they live. They don't have to work: Jeff fishes and hunts, and Aunt Venus goes out and does fine cooking on special occasions. They have a good garden, and chickens and pigs and cows, a horse and buggy, bees, dogs, and ducks, and are just as happy as it is possible to be.

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"I did the same thing for Uncle Rube and Aunt Dicey. They live on the other side of the place on a little farm I gave them, but Rube has been around the house so long he is just miserable if he isn't here. But he don't have to do it."

"Well, I'm glad to know all this," said Mr. Ralston. "We folks up home don't understand how you can do the things you do and not have the negroes presume."

"We would not think of treating these negroes born after the war with the affectionate familiarity we do the old ones who have been raised in our family or some other family of good white folks," replied the major.

So the party went to the possum-and-coon supper, and it was just as had been predicted. Tom thought he had never tasted anything better than that baked possum with the golden yellow yams baked in the rich, well-seasoned gravy.

Aunt Venus, weighing nearly three hundred pounds and black as a hat, in contrast to her wiry little yellow husband, beamed at the compliments to her cooking. When the major was leaving he gave her a couple of silver dollars and told her to buy some pink satin ribbons so she could go to church and flirt with the other men and make Jeff jealous—that he did not begin to appreciate properly such a fine cook.

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"Dat's de trufe, Marse Robert!" exclaimed Venus. "Dat nigger sho is sp'iled. Hyar he is, eatin' grub eve'y day cooked by er cook dat de Sain' Chawles Hotel in N' Yawleens offered seventy-five dollars er month, en he don' 'preciate hit. He oughter be kep' on cawn-pone en water erbout two weeks."

"Well, how'd you like it?" inquired the major, as they rode homeward. "Get enough?"

"No, sir!" said Tom. "I got all I could hold, but I couldn't hold enough. That was the best eating I ever have run across!"

"You bet!" added Mr. Ralston. "We must try it again."

"You better stay down here a month or so, Ralston, and hunt and eat stuff like that; it will make a new man of you, and Tom too. Let your old factory run itself?" suggested Major Dean.

"I'm just going to do that very thing," said Mr. Ralston. "I've got about enough money—think I'll sell out and live down here all the time. I never have had any fun in my life like this. Always had to work too hard."

"Hope you will!" added the major, heartily.

CHAPTER XVII

IT was the mid-winter season, and there was very little to do on the farm besides the care of the stock. Joe and Mr. Weston had got seventeen calves, and none of them cost over three dollars. The pasturage on the rye and young oats was beginning to have its effect on the scrawny little creatures, and they were showing an improvement right along. They were carefully kept out of the weather at night, in dry quarters, with plenty of provender, and bedded in leaves. The compost pile was growing, too.

Joe and his father kept up their studies at night, but every Saturday Joe spent over at the Ralstons. There was a great deal that Tom and his father also could learn from the country-bred boy, and he in turn found association with the city people was improving to him. The three of them took long walks in the surrounding country, and Tom told them the names of every tree and plant, of bird and beast, and their habits.

Major Dean was staying most of the time

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at Runnemedede now, to the delight of the Ralstons, and was showing the new owner of the place how to get ready for the crop season. He was away on horseback most of the time, looking over the two thousand acres of the plantation.

One crisp morning in early January, after frost had vanished from the ground, Tom and Joe stepped out on the front porch. Tom kept sniffing the soft Gulf breeze blowing from the south.

"Seems to me like I smell candy cooking. I've been smelling it ever since yesterday," he remarked.

"You've got a pretty good smeller—only it's sugar and molasses cooking down at the sugar-house. Ever see sugar made?"

"No. Where is it?"

"On your own place here. Don't you know where the sugar-house is, away down the bayou road?"

"I had forgotten about it," confessed Tom.

"Come on, let's go down there. I'll bet the major is there," suggested Joe, and, sure enough, as they approached the long, low building of brick with a square brick smoke-stack at one end, the major was seen bustling around, directing the hands. Clustered side by side below the chimney were the kettles, each over a brick furnace, beginning with an immense three-

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hundred-gallon one and ending with a smaller one, below which were some wide troughs which looked like mortar-beds, only they overlapped one another at the lower end. There were four of the troughs.

Outside, bolted to a cross-section of an immense gum-tree set deep in the ground and projecting about five feet above the surface, was the cane-mill, or crusher, a series of steel rollers geared together and operated by a long sweep-pole, at one end of which was hitched a team of mules who walked in a circle the length of the sweep and thus turned the crusher.

Two negro boys were feeding the stalks of sugar-cane into the rollers, two at a time. The juice ran down in the pan surrounding the mill, and then from a spout fell upon a mass of Spanish moss in a slanting trough. This was to filter out the bits of bark and pith and trash; then the juice was again filtered through several thicknesses of cheese-cloth into a barrel, from which it was dipped and taken to other settling or clarifying barrels.

"We ought to have started grinding in November, Tom," said the major, "but I was on this deal to sell to your father, so I had the cane cut and banked as you see it." The cane had been laid in furrows and dirt thrown over it to prevent its freezing. When it freezes the juice

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rapidly ferments and is useless for sugar or molasses purposes.

"Is that juice good to drink?" inquired Tom, indicating the clear white blood of the cane trickling down into the barrel.

"Try it. The mill saves you the trouble of chewing it out of the stalks," said the major, dipping a tin cup full and tendering it to Tom.

It was sweet and cool, and delightfully fragrant and fine. Tom liked the taste immensely, and held out the cup for more.

"I'll just try another cup of it," he announced.

"Better not, Tom," warned Joe Weston. "That stuff will give you [an awful stomach-ache if you get too much of it. What you drank is equal to about three big stalks of cane. Wait until we are ready to go before you try it again."

"Come on; let's see what they are doing inside. I always get the sugar off first so the molasses-making can proceed without any interruption," said the major.

"I didn't know sugar could be made up here?" inquired Tom.

"As a matter of fact, my boy, it *is* seventy-five miles north of the 'sugar belt.' But long before the war sugar was expensive, and father had plenty of labor—slaves—and he concluded to make his own sugar and molasses. He could

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make some money at it, too, when he owned his labor, but with wage hands one just about gets out even. There is vastly more money making molasses. I have made a few barrels of sugar every year for my own use and the tenants', but not as a strictly commercial transaction. That light-yellow sugar we had on the table for breakfast was made right here."

"Seems to me that is sweeter than the white granulated sugar," observed Joe.

"I think it is," answered the major. "In refining some of the sweetness seems to be lost."

They went inside, and fires were blazing under the kettles. A negro man was busy shoving sticks of cord-wood into the furnaces underneath. Just as the party entered, the work of transferring the contents of the first or three-hundred-gallon kettle was being accomplished by means of bailing-cans on the end of stout poles.

"You see, boys," said Major Dean, "a large percentage of the cane-juice is merely water. The raw juice is first put in this big kettle with the broad bottom exposed to the heat, and boiled down one-third to a thin syrup—most of the water has then evaporated. At the same time the froth, and the impurities which rise to the top, are skimmed off and put in that barrel there.

"Then in the next kettle the work of reducing

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the water is continued, leaving the first kettle to be refilled with raw juice. When the second kettle of what is now thin molasses is emptied into the third one, there is hardly a hundred gallons, instead of the three hundred we started with. Then the cooking has to be done very carefully, or the 'taffy,' as it is called, will scorch.

"The cook watches closely for evidences of crystallization, testing it every few minutes, and the heat is gradually diminished until the right time, when the mass of hot stuff is emptied into one of those cooling-troughs you see. As it cools it crystallizes more perfectly, and after it is quite cool the vent at the lower end of the trough is opened and the syrup is allowed to drain off. The crude sugar is left in the first trough, and in the second, and some in the third, which you note is a big tank, really. Then the sugar is worked over with wooden paddles and allowed to drain further. Later, after it is about as dry as it will get, it is packed in barrels loosely made and turned up on that inclined draining-floor and left there a month or two. By that time the syrup is about all out of it, and the sugar is light yellow in color."

"It's a right slow process, isn't it?" commented Tom, biting into the mass of warm, toothsome taffy the cook had gathered up for him on the end of a little stick,

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"Oh yes," said the major; "and that's the reason the individual sugar-maker like myself, with my antiquated little mill, would lose money hand over fist trying to compete with the big modern sugar-factories. Down in the real sugar country they have immense establishments, miles and miles of cane-fields with cane brought to tram dump-cars; loaded on them by machinery, pulled in long train-loads to the mill; weighed automatically, dumped the same way on a traveling conveyer, which sorts it and feeds it automatically into steam-driven rollers that extract ninety-eight per cent. of the juice, where I get only about fifty per cent. here. The steam-mills crush the cane so dry that the 'bagasse,' as it is called, is fed right into the furnaces for fuel to raise steam with. Then the ashes are used for fertilizer for next year's crop."

"Sort of a perpetual-motion arrangement?" commented Joe.

"Rather much like it. Then the juice from the crushers is strained automatically, pumped from the big settling and clarifying tanks into vats where it is cooked quickly by superheated steam instead of this slow process. When crystallization takes place the taffy, or crude sugar, is dumped into a centrifugal—"

"What is that?" asked Tom.

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"A great big steel drum perforated like a strainer and revolving three or four thousand times a minute. The centrifugal is started with its load of sticky taffy, and in less than five minutes does the work of months here. Every particle of molasses is whirled out of that sugar and against the sides of the jacket inclosing the centrifugal, leaving the sugar perfectly dry. The molasses runs down the sides of the casing to a vat below. It is at once pumped back into another cooking-vat until crystallization again takes place; then to the centrifugal again, but each time it is recooked a lower grade of sugar results. After several of these cookings there is practically no sugar left in the syrup. It is black, thick, and almost bitter, instead of this golden sweet 'sirop de batterie,' as the French call this open-kettle syrup. And then the drainings from the crude sugar are the finest grade yet—they are called 'bleedings.'"

"It is mighty interesting," said Tom. "But what I want to know is, why don't we get syrup like this—like we eat up at the house—up North?"

"For one reason, our people down here are great syrup-eaters, and they won't let this real open-kettle product get away. It is too good to sell; they want it themselves," laughed the major. "But a great many farmers now are

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planting cane and making it into pure syrup, and quite a demand has been created for it in the North. It is a fine food, and contains all the sugar."

"Tom, you saw that barrel of skimmings?" asked Joe. Tom nodded. "Well, last year the negroes around here kept getting drunk, and nobody knew how they were getting liquor. Finally it came out that they let those skimmings ferment, and one darky had rigged up a tin ham-boiler with a top and a piece of old rubber tubing to carry off the steam. The fermented stuff was boiled in the vessel. The tube was coiled in a keg of cold water to condense the steam, and a mighty bad quality of 'fighting rum' was the result. The negro was bottling it and selling it, but the United States revenue officers got him, and he is doing a year in prison now."

"We see that the skimmings are emptied out on the ground each day now—that is, what we do not feed to the hogs," said Major Dean. "It is very fattening."

"Cane mighty sweet dis year," remarked Alfred, the sugar-cook, a tall old yellow negro who had helped make sugar on the place before the war. "Hit's on account of de dry fall—lots of rain makes de cane sappy an' not much sugar."

"That's good. Don't bother about making

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over twenty barrels of sugar, Alfred. Make the rest in molasses. And you better be getting those barrels ready, too."

"All right, sir. And, Major," he continued, "the b'ars are smellin' this cookin'. I seen signs of two of 'em' round here this mornin'—a pretty good-sized one, another smaller."

"Well, now, that *is* luck! Tom, how'd you like to have a bear-hunt, you and Joe?" asked the major.

"Best in the world!"

"I expect Mr. Ralston would like to go too; we'll just go after those bears. Here, you boy—come here!" A small darky munching on a piece of sugar-cane approached.

"What's your name?"

"Dey calls me Dink," answered the urchin, never stopping his attack on the cane.

"Is that your real name?" inquired the major.

"Nosser; mer name's Moses Aberham Wash-'n't'n Potts, but dey call me Dink fer short."

"And a very good idea with such a name. You know where old Uncle Jeff lives, down on the Pigeon Roost road?"

"Ya-asser!"

"Scoot down there and tell him to come to the big house after dinner; I want to see him. Here, maybe this dime will make your legs work faster—you reckon?"

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"Ya-asser!" The boy clutched the coin, jerked his hat in token of thanks, and started in a trot down the road.

"Jeff can get us up a fairly good pack of bear-dogs," explained the major. "He has four of his own, and with six or eight more we can have some fun."

On the return to the house Mr. Ralston was enthused over the idea, although he had never done any hunting. Tom, under the teaching of Joe Weston, had become a very fair shot. He had a little sixteen-gage shotgun, and Joe had been giving him instructions for several days. He had got to the point of proficiency where he had been able to bring down a few quail on the wing, and was immensely proud of his achievement. He promptly took his father in hand, and was passing his knowledge on to Mr. Ralston with very fair success, having an apt pupil.

Immediately there was a bustle of preparation around the house, getting hunting equipment ready. The major was going to carry his forty-four repeating rifle; Tom had a thirty-eight Winchester; and Joe pinned his faith to a twelve-gage shotgun and buckshot shells.

Uncle Jeff came up about three o'clock, and was highly elated at the idea of a bear-hunt. Mr. Ralston furnished him a horse to ride, and

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he assured the hunters he could collect a dozen dogs by night, and would be ready to start at dawn next morning.

Major Dean rode back to the sugar-house, and directed that several tubs of the skimmings from the molasses be left outside where the bears could get at the sweet stuff, as they are notoriously fond of honey and molasses. Uncle Rube got the horses ready, the guns and equipments were oiled and in shape, and Joe Weston rode over home to tell his parents that he would spend the night at the Ralstons' and go bear-hunting in the morning.

Accordingly, the hunters turned in early to get a good night's rest, for the start was to be considerably before day the next morning.

CHAPTER XVIII

“T-OO-T! T-oo-oot! T-ooo-ot!”

Tom and Joe bounced up in bed and listened. It seemed as if they had only climbed in a minute before. The horn was sounding in front of the house, and it appeared as if all the dogs in creation were yelping, baying, barking, and whining out there. Tom looked at his watch—they had slept with the lamp turned low so as to be ready.

“Four o’clock. Uncle Jeff is on time!”

Tom ran to the fireplace and touched a match to the fat pine splinters beneath an armful of lightwood knots. In less than a minute a roaring fire filled the wide fireplace and began to warm the room.

“It’s kind of chilly this morning!” observed Joe, with chattering teeth.

“Great Scott! You call this chilly? How’d you like to wake up like I did at Aunt Henrietta’s up in New Hampshire and find the water in the pitcher a solid block of ice, and my breath on the blankets frozen, and the thermometer fifteen degrees below zero?” said Tom.

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"Wouldn't like it, and I'd move away from such cold as that, if I had to walk every step of the way," answered Joe, hustling into his clothes.

"Here! Hold on! You take that old suit of mine," said Tom. "Uncle Jeff said we are going into swamps and cane-brakes 'whut is sho 'nuff cane-brakes.' No use your ruining your good clothes."

"All right; but I expect that old suit of yours is about as good as this one of mine. Give it here."

Uncle Jeff's horn was heard at the rear of the house, where he had gone to wake Rube and his wife and the stable-boy, but they had been up nearly an hour. There was a meal of hot coffee, fried ham and eggs, and some hot corn-batter cakes and biscuits ready for the hunters.

Mr. Ralston and the major came down in a few minutes. At the major's belt was a long bowie-knife, and on the other side a six-shooter of heavy caliber.

"Look like you were going West to hold up trains or shoot Indians!" commented Tom. "I didn't know a person had to take all that hardware along to kill bears."

"Oh, it's just a matter of choice," said the major, "but it is almighty handy to have a knife. Saved my life and Jeff's too, once—this very knife."

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"How was that?" inquired Joe, at the same time busy with his breakfast.

"Once when Jeff and I were boys, not much older than you two chaps, we went down in the same cane-brakes we are going into this morning. We had old muzzle-loading shotguns with nothing but small bird-shot. We were out for squirrels, and we scared up a bear. Or it scared us up, I should say.

"He was a whale of a bear, too. Jeff, like a fool, fired a load of these small shot at long range. The shot merely made him fighting-mad, and he made a rush for us. A vine was in my way as I stepped back so I could get a sight on him. I wanted to put those shot in his eyes and blind him—killing was out of the question—and I tripped and fell."

"Did the bear jump on you?" asked Tom, breathlessly.

"No, for Jeff stepped in and broke his gun over the bear's head. It diverted attention from me, but the bear knocked Jeff winding with one sweep of its paw, and tore his shoulder frightfully, then was trying to hug him to death. I could not shoot for fear of hitting Jeff, so I waded in with this knife, which belonged to my father and which I had just put on to be carrying it.

"I managed to cut the bear's jugular vein

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the first lick, when the bear dropped Jeff and grabbed me. I was working on him with the knife—managed to stab him right in the heart—and he was losing blood so fast he could not crush me as he tried to, but he was clawing my back to ribbons, and I was bathed in blood gushing from the bear's throat and breast. He had mashed my shoulder and broken a rib, and I could not use the knife any more.

"Jeff managed to get hold of my gun, and placed the muzzle right against the bear's head and blew his brains out, and that released me.

"We managed to get home, Jeff with three broken ribs, and I with one broken rib and a back slithered into ribbons with those claws, but it taught me a lesson. I never go for bears without this knife; and a good heavy pistol at close quarters is handy, too."

By this time breakfast was over, and the party went out and mounted their horses. Uncle Jeff came too, and Uncle Rube, and an old half-Indian negro they called Choctaw, who owned a number of the dogs that made up the pack of fourteen. Choctaw walked so he could better control the dogs.

"We'll start from the sugar-house, Jeff," ordered the major, who was in command of the hunt. "I told Alfred to leave some skimmings

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where the bears could get to them, and I'm sure we'll get a trail there."

The dogs circled the silent sugar-house, then at the wash-tub, which had been overturned and licked clean, the pack broke into full cry and started for the woods, almost a mile distant. The day was now showing gray in the east, and in the west the half-moon was shining, so there was little difficulty in following.

"Those bears heard Jeff and his horn and the dogs up there at the house when he came, and they knew what it meant. They are not an hour ahead of us, and they will go slow after they strike the woods. Look out for your eyes now from twigs and limbs," called the major. He led the advance into the timber. The dogs were now making the woods resound with their music.

Choctaw was right behind them, following in a long, swinging Indian trot, and his horn could be heard at intervals as a guide for the hunters. All were too busy dodging limbs and vines now to talk, and the horses trailed off after the major's mount without any guidance from their riders.

Perhaps ten minutes had been spent going forward, twisting and turning in the forest trails, thick with cane fifteen and twenty feet high among the gum and blackjack trees, when the party reined up.

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"By George, I haven't heard the dogs for some time!" wondered Major Dean.

"Wait er minnet—be still!" cautioned Uncle Jeff, putting his hand to his ear and listening. A faint morning breeze stirred the dry cane-tops, and on it could just be distinguished the sound of the horn in the distance.

"Callin' us, folks; callin' us!" said the old negro, excitedly. "Dat's way down by Dead Man's Dump, er mile er mo' f'om here. Dem dawgs has sho been movin'. Come on; dey's er ole wood-road over dis way!"

A hundred yards or so to the left the horses struck the wood trail and fell into a swift lope. Presently they paused, and Jeff sent a long, swift call echoing through the silent forest.

The answer was the tooting of the horn not a quarter of a mile away and faint sounds of barking, yelping dogs.

"Treed, by gum! Treed!" cried Uncle Jeff. "Come on; I knows de way. It's down in dat big ole dip in de woods torrards de bayou—come on!" He was as excited as the boys.

Sending another yell ringing through the woods in answer to the horn, the horses struck a lope again. The baying became more distinct, and the horn sounded nearer them. Jeff swung from his horse and hurriedly hitched it to a sapling.

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"Hosses can't stand a b'ar," he explained, as the others did the same; and the party started, Indian file, after him in a trot down a long slope thick with black-gum trees and pin-oaks. At the bottom there was a sudden rise, almost like an Indian mound, on the apex of which stood an immense solitary magnolia tree.

On its hind-legs, back to the tree, and with lolling tongue and blazing eyes, was an immense bear, tall as a man, and evidently frenzied with rage.

The dogs were frantic with excitement, but afraid to venture in. One would run around behind and nip Bruin, and as he turned to slap at the dog others would bite him in front. The carcasses of two dogs whose bravery had run away with their discretion lay at the feet of the bear.

"I been holdin' 'im yere fer yer!" exclaimed Rube. "He's a big 'un, an' mean—Lawdy mussy! Dem yuther two dey lit out fer de cane-brake an' ain' stopped yit, but dis yer ole scoun'l beas' he 'lowed he warn' gwine run ernother step. Now me en Choctaw 'll put all dem dawgs atter 'im, an' you'll see er fight whut is er fight!"

"Hold on, Rube. You and Choctaw 'll get all your dogs killed!" called the major.

"Naw, suh; not *my* dawgs. Dey's fit b'ars

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befo'; an' dem yuthers ain' nuffin' but jes' common nigger dawgs. Ef dey pulls thoo dis fight maybe dey's got de makin's of er good b'ar-dog in 'em some day; an' ef dey gits kilt hit ain' no perticler loss. Whoopee! Git 'im, boys! Ketch 'im, boys! Sic 'im, Drum—you Blue, go atter 'im, ole boy! Sic 'im, Rattler! Toot! Toot! Ketch 'im—whooee!"

The dogs were almost maddened by the encouragement and the horn. The pack made a rush, and two dogs jumped for his throat.

The mighty forearm swung, and the carcass of one dog rolled down the hill; the other was instantly crushed to a shapeless mass against the bosom of the bear. Another reaching swing of his arms and a hound went howling down the slope, an ear in tattered ribbons.

"He's a-gettin' uneasy; he's gwine ter make er break!" called Uncle Jeff. "Don' le's shoot him yet; dis yer is too much fun!"

He proved a good prophet. The bear made a dash down the far side of the slope, dogs swarming about him and nipping him amid a bedlam of yelps and howls and snarls mingled with growls from the bear. He raised up a moment on his hind-legs. With incredible rapidity he bowled a dog over dead, and resumed his swift, lumbering lope. The men and boys chased after him, the pack of dogs again upon him.

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"He's tryin' ter git in de thick cane whar de dawgs won't have sich a sweep at 'im!" yelled Choctaw.

The cane-brake was about three hundred yards away, dense, almost impenetrable, and stretching a quarter of a mile on each side of a deep, swift bayou. The bear started to climb a beech tree, but the dogs nipped him so he gave up the attempt. Running a short distance, he backed up against another tree and killed another dog.

The dogs were now reduced almost to Jeff's pack, and they, from long acquaintance with bears, had a wholesome respect for those powerful, swift-striking arms with lancelike claws at the ends.

They swarmed and bit and baited, yelping and dodging and worrying, until they and the animal seemed almost frenzied.

In his excitement Tom had danced around until he was between the bear and the cane-brake.

"If he makes a rush this time we must shoot him; we can't let him get in that cane!" called the major. "Give him plenty of room; everybody fall back!"

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than with an awful snort and cry of frenzied rage the desperate bear dropped to all fours

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and made a charge, eyes blazing and bloody foam dripping from the lolling tongue.

Tom Ralston was right in the path of the animal.

"Look out! Look out! Shoot, Tom! Shoot!" yelled the major, who went white as a sheet.

Tom was frightened out of his wits for a moment at the giant bear coming toward him. Determination to wipe the offending human from his path to liberty showed in the eyes, as in a moment the creature raised on his hind-legs and advanced on the boy.

"Shoot, Tom! Shoot!" almost groaned the major. Mr. Ralston was so paralyzed with fear for his son that he could not utter a word.

The rest of the crowd were all clustered in the direction the bear came from, and to shoot was almost certainly to kill Tom. The major suddenly ran at right angles, in order to get a shot which would not imperil Tom's life as well as that of the bear. It all happened in a moment.

Suddenly the paralyzing fear left Tom. The realization hammered on his brain that he must fight for his life. The bear was not twenty feet away, and was coming on with waving arms, bared teeth, and ears laid back.

Tom threw his rifle to his shoulder, sighted quickly at the breast just between those powerful arms, and pulled the trigger. At the crack of

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the rifle the bear flinched, paused, and in that second Tom had ejected the shell and put another bullet near the first one. The bear wavered, then dropped to all fours for a rush, and as he did so Tom placed another bullet in the shoulder. This crippled the animal, which was staggering toward him, game to the last, and, when not ten feet away, another well-directed bullet in the brain stopped the charge, and the great creature fell dead in its tracks.

"I got him! I got him! I got him!" was the shrill pæan of victory that rang from Tom's lips and stirred the paralyzed party beyond, who rushed forward.

Tom forgot the sickening horror of the moment before when he expected to be torn by those awful claws, and he danced about the dead bear with the joy of a child.

"Well, if that wasn't the coolest proposition I ever saw!" gasped the major, after a long breath. "What made you wait that way, Tom? Suppose your gun had missed fire? It was the bravest thing I ever saw in a chap, and one not used to hunting, too!"

"I'm not going to get a reputation for bravery under false pretenses," answered Tom, "and I tell you the honest truth—I was scared so bad at first I just couldn't shoot until I knew I had to or get clawed!"

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The major dipped his finger in the blood of the bear and made a curious mark, like a large comma, on Tom's forehead with it.

"What's that for?" inquired Tom, grinning.

"That's your initiation, your christening, into the ranks of big-game hunters. It is an old custom of the tribe of Indians that used to live around here, and it's done ever since I knew how to hunt."

"Dat's right!" supported the usually silent old half-Indian negro, Choctaw. "My granddaddy, ole Injun name Tillatubbe, he done me dat way w'en I got mer firs' b'ar, en he said his daddy gin' him de mark de fus' big game he kill, en his daddy done de same, en his granddaddy."

"All right!" said Tom, proudly. "I want to go the limit, but it never occurred to me to kill that bear until we looked right into each other's eyes a half-second. Then I knew it was his life or mine, and I hardly realized what I was doing when I was pumping him full of bullets."

"You is brave, jes' de same," said Uncle Jeff. "Hit takes er brave man to tell de tru't sometimes. All dese hyar fellers whut says dey ain' skeered dey b'longs ter de same lodge wid ole man Annernias whut we reads erbout in de Good Book."

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"That bearskin will be something to take back up North and show the folks. It will open their eyes, old chap!" said Joe Weston. "Uncle Jeff, I want you to take that hide off and leave the skull and teeth, and fix it up for Mr. Ralston for a rug," said Joe.

"It's a beauty, too!" commented Tom's father. He was just beginning to get his nerve back enough to talk.

"One of the prettiest and largest I have ever seen," said the major. "That old scamp has been living off my roasting-ears and yams and sugar-cane all summer and is fat as a seal. The hide is fine and glossy. It will make a magnificent souvenir."

"Uncle Rube, what do you reckon that bear weighs?" inquired Tom.

"Ter tell de trufe, dat s erbout de bigges' varmint of de sort whut's been kilt in dis neck er de woods since I kin recomember. Dat b'ar weighs nigh onto six hunnerd pouns."

"Are we going after the other two?" inquired Joe Weston.

"I think this is glory and game enough for one day," answered the major. "We will save the others. I'll have Alfred put the skimmings from the sugar-house where they can get them, and keep those bears in the neighborhood, so we can have one more hunt before the season closes."

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"How we gwine git all dis meat home?" asked Uncle Rube.

"You and Jeff and Choctaw stay here and skin that bear and cut up the meat: I'll send the stable-boy down with the spring-wagon as far as the wagon can go on the wood-road, and the four of you can pack the meat then to where the wagon is," said the major.

"Well, Marse Tom, I wants one er dem paws arter de skin an' de claws is took off; er pig-foot ain' er sarcumstance ter how good hit is ter eat." Uncle Jeff licked his lips in pleasurable anticipation.

"You certainly shall have a paw off my bear, Uncle Jeff," agreed Tom, "provided you fix me one just like it to eat."

"Dat sho is er trade!"

Jeff then pulled off his coat and began helping Rube skin the bear, using the major's bowie. The dogs were still excitedly grouped around and nursing their wounds, but expectant of the titbits they would soon receive as a reward for their services in the cause. Choctaw was kindling a fire at which he expected to broil a few steaks for the refreshment of himself and Jeff and Rube.

"Reckon we'd better be getting back home, Mr. Ralston," suggested the major. "It's about twelve o'clock—will be dinner-time when we get there."

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"Yes, I'm ready for mine right now," asserted Mr. Ralston. "Come on, boys!"

"I don't want to go now, I want to stay here and see 'em skin this bear and get a taste of those broiled bear-steaks," said Tom.

"Me, too," said Joe Weston. Mr. Ralston looked a bit sheepish.

"This is the first real hunt I ever was on, Major," he confessed, "and I believe I'd like to stay with the boys and see the thing through and taste bear meat broiled in the woods."

"Well, it's mighty fine, but it is no novelty to me. Believe I'd rather go home and get a good dinner and take a nap. I'm getting too old for such early rising and so much exercise without some rest," said Major Dean.

"Make dat boy Jim bring us some bread en some salt en pepper when he comes wid de waggin, ple' suh?" suggested Uncle Rube.

"I was just going to suggest that," answered the major. "I'll get home fast as I can and get him started. Good-by!"

In about an hour Jim arrived with a basket in which were half a dozen corn-pones, a dozen or so biscuit, and some light bread. There was plenty of pepper and salt. The coals were ready, and Choctaw cut the steaks and broiled them. Liberally sprinkled with salt and pepper and greased in their own fat, the bear-meat steaks were great-

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ly relished by the hungry party; and it was late in the afternoon when the wagon bearing the rest of the meat, the hide, and the darkies not provided with horses started on its way back to the house.

"I've just had a bully time!" said Joe Weston. "It was the first bear-hunt I have ever been on, but I hunt birds and rabbits and possums and coons all the time when I get a chance."

"Father, I like it out here in the country a heap better than living in town. I want to stay here all the year," urged Tom Ralston.

"Really, Tom, it is the first sure-enough fun I have ever had. Think I'll begin to get my business in such shape I can spend all the winter down here, at any rate," answered his father.

"I just wish you would."

"Do you like it that much, son?"

"I sure do. I'm going to be a farmer," announced Tom, with finality. "I am going to learn all about it."

"What do you think of country life, Joe?" inquired Mr. Ralston.

"I'm just beginning to learn something about it myself," answered Joe Weston. "Used to live in the country just like a goat or a cow or a horse: just took what happened to be there. Now I'm trying to learn the 'why' of things and put on the ground what I want. Biggest chance in it of anything, I think."

CHAPTER XIX

JOE WESTON returned home with a big bear ham, and the Weston family reveled in bear-steaks and a fine roast for several days. The weather was crisp and cool, and the meat kept well.

Monday he bought two calves at school, the boys owning them bringing them there for delivery. One he got for a dollar and a half, the other for two dollars. This was a heifer, showing traces of Jersey blood. He drove his acquisitions home that evening and turned them in on the oats, which they went at as if they were starving.

"We'll just keep that little grade Jersey," he suggested to his father. "We will be needing more cows, and can make money on butter. I expect we can pick up a good many worth keeping."

"That's right," agreed Mr. Weston. "There's another nice little heifer calf down behind the hill grazing on my oats—looks like she's got Jersey in her too."

"Le's plant all the stuff we can for feed this

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year, and keep all this stock in good shape. It is bound to pay us fine by next year and the year after."

"We'll just do that very thing," said Mr. Weston. "I want to break that awful poor piece of land on the hilltop and turn under a lot of this fertilizer and stuff so it can start to rotting. You'll have to help me with the haulin'."

"All right, but we haven't got near enough fertilizer."

"I know that, but I want to stop the washin' on that piece of land and turn under what we can. Deep plowin' an' that fertilizer stuff will make it hold water better, an' I'll run the furrows so they'll carry the water. It's too exposed to do much as a field, an' too poor for a pasture. My idee's to put some life in that soil, then use that whole hill for a pasture after gettin' it set good in grass an' clover."

"What you going to plant first—pease?"

"Nope—velvet-beans. They'll run all over creation, stop the washing, put nitrogen in the soil, shed lots of leaves to plow under, and give us a fine pasture themselves. The cattle will help build the soil with the droppings while runnin' on it."

"Oh, I read something about those beans. They are said to be mighty fine for stock."

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"That's what I hear. We'll try 'em, anyway. Then next fall, after the cattle have eaten up the vines and stuff, we'll break the land again, put it in oats, let 'em graze it all winter. The oats 'll hold the land and stop the washing if planted thick. Then in spring turn 'em under an' we've got some sure-enough good pasture-land. Then sow clover an' good Bermuda grass and lespedeza."

"I think that plan will work all right," agreed Joe. "We'll start hauling at daylight tomorrow. I can make a couple of loads of fertilizer before time for school."

"We got to fence that pasture, too, Joe. We got to run it down on this side so as to take in the branch, for water an' so the cattle can get down about the shade in the middle of the day. It's goin' to cost a heap more'n I figgered on."

"Well, we can't raise stock without fences, or crops either. If we get the posts ourselves, put 'em in ourselves, and string the wire ourselves I can't see how it's going to cost so much."

"Yes, but we'll have to buy the wire on credit."

"Well, that's all right as long as the stuff helps increase the earning power of the place, ain't it, pa?"

"I been burnt on this credit business so long

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I'm afeard to buy anything less'n I got the money to pay for it, Joe."

"The difference is that we didn't have anything to pay with in the past—no certain prospects, I mean. Now we've got stock enough to pay about all we owe—outside of what's due on the place."

"Mebbe so, but I ain't struck on this credit business, anyhow." Mr. Weston shook his head, still unconvinced.

"Credit is all right if it is used right," insisted Joe.

"Who told you that?" demanded his father.

"At the bank. Mr. Hollis, the cashier, told me, 'Don't be afraid to capitalize your earning power, and don't be afraid of credit if you know you have stuff of more than its value to back it up with. The trouble is, folks just plunge in without considering those things.'"

"That's new to me. Reckon it's right—banker ought to know—"

They were interrupted by Mr. Ralston and Tom, who had driven over and hitched the team at the front gate. The visitors looked around the place carefully, and were much interested in the plans of Joe and his father.

"Look here, Mr. Weston; if you need any capital to help you work this proposition out

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I can lend you all you want at four per cent.," suggested the manufacturer.

"Much obliged. I'm carrying a hundred and fifty dollars at ten per cent. at the bank. I'll just switch that and save six per cent.," announced Mr. Weston.

"Better get another hundred, pa. It's cheaper to rent the cash at four per cent. and trade for cash with the discounts that are allowed than to pay credit prices," suggested Joe.

"That's business!" said Mr. Ralston. "If the farmers could get cheap money to finance themselves with like manufacturers, they could do much better. I just imagined you could use some cheap money, and I've got some lying around idle, so I thought I'd help you out."

"Much obliged—it will be a big help. In a couple of years more Joe and me hope to be able to have a bit extry on the side and be able to finance ourselves."

"Hope you will, Mr. Weston."

"Oh, we'll work this thing out and have a surplus by then, I am sure," asserted Joe, with confidence.

"Then we want to buy some more land and raise more stock," Mr. Weston confided. "There's good profit in stock if you raise all they eat," he added.

"I've always thought that myself," responded

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Mr. Ralston. "It is just like a manufacturer producing all his raw product to be worked up into the finished article: he makes the profit on the raw product, saves the middlemen's profits, and then makes a profit on the finished stuff."

"That's the way it looks to me," agreed Joe.

"Better talk to 'em about what we came over here for?" Tom reminded his father.

"Oh yes. Well, I've got a proposition to make to you and Joe, Mr. Weston."

"All right, go ahead."

"I want to learn to be a farmer!" Tom confided.

"That's it," added Mr. Ralston. "Tom is very greatly taken with country life. He has never been healthy or strong in the city. In the two months we've been here he looks better than I have ever seen him. He wants to stay the year through, and I want him to."

"I'm glad he's going to stay—hated to think of his leaving," said Joe.

"I've got that big plantation, and I don't know what to do with it," continued Mr. Ralston. "I can't handle it. Major Dean has kindly helped me get the crops off and plan some for spring, but when he goes I will be utterly at sea."

"It's a good place. Major Dean made lots

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of money off it, an' his daddy got rich there in slavery times," said Mr. Weston.

"So, as I told you, it's my idea to close up my active business affairs and come here to live in the fall and winter and spring, at all events. But it will take more than two years for me to fix things so that I can let go of active business."

"Well, sir?"

"And meanwhile Tom wants to learn as much as possible about farming. I'll just leave Mrs. Ralston and the little girls down here, and I want to put Tom in charge of Joe as his tutor in agriculture."

"And that's what I want to do, too!" asserted Tom.

Mr. Weston considered, gravely.

"I don't see no objection," he answered. "Do you, Joe?"

"I like Tom mighty well," said Joe, "but I've got some important work to do myself. You know, pa, we've got to pay this place out. And I want to win that state prize this year—the prize on Corn Club work. It's a scholarship in the best agricultural college in the West. I don't see how I can spare the time."

"Oh, that will be easy, then," assured Mr. Ralston. "I don't want you to give up your work at all. On the contrary, I want you to

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go right ahead with it. I merely want the privilege of having Tom associate with you and watch you and pick up information from you—”

“And help work, too!” interrupted Tom.

“Why, that will be easy, then,” said Joe Weston.

“I expect to pay you for it. I am willing to mail you a check for thirty dollars each month for a year. At the end of the year, if everything is all right and Tom wants to keep on, I’ll let you two chaps try your hand running the plantation, and I’ll pay you, Joe, fifty dollars a month next year. How does that suit?”

“I’m agreeable.”

“If it suits Joe it suits me,” said Mr. Weston.

“All right; we’ll just date the contract from January—Tom has learned a lot since then from Joe—”

“Oh, here, now—I didn’t think I was teaching then!” objected Joe.

“That’s part of the game. He has learned a lot just the same, and here is thirty dollars for that last month—” Mr. Ralston held out three ten-dollar bills.

“But it was mostly hunting and rambling around and having fun,” said Joe. He did not think he had earned the money.

“That is the way I want it to keep up. I want Tom to enter your life here just like a

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brother would. Only, I want you to bear in mind that I wish him to get the benefit of what you know, and lose no opportunity to inform him about everything pertaining to country life and agriculture. And he is to work, too. I will instruct him as to that."

"Is that all right with you, Tom?" inquired Joe, gravely.

"Yes, school-teacher!" mimicked Tom.

"Here, now; cut that out!" suggested Joe, with dignity. "This is a business matter. We are going along—if we go—just like we have been doing, only I am going to tell you all I know and see that you learn it—or we don't go into this thing at all."

"That's good! I agree to that; it's all right with me," said Tom, dropping his foolishness. The two boys shook hands on the trade. Mr. Ralston was greatly pleased at the arrangement.

"I've ordered a private telephone-line put in between this place and ours so you boys can keep in closer touch, and it will be extended to town for the convenience and protection it affords."

"Glad of that," said Mr. Weston. "Will save hauling stuff to town only to find the prices ain't right—save lots of time and loss, too. Then it's a protection and help in case of sickness or fire or such."

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"I don't see why there are not more telephone-lines in the country," said Mr. Ralston. "They are needed there just as much as in the cities."

"And, Joe, that bay pony will be for your use at all times. Just telephone over and the lot-boy will bring her, or you can keep her here, just as you choose. You know I have that new dapple-gray one," said Tom.

"I intended to mention that," said Mr. Ralston. "That is the arrangement I have made. It will save lots of time and, I hope, give you some pleasure too, Joe."

"It certainly will. I have always wanted a horse to ride. It is fine!" His eyes glowed with happiness.

"Now, I want you boys to have all the fun you can, but at the same time, Tom, I want you to understand that there is a purpose underneath all this, and I want you to learn all you can. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"And where Joe tells you to pitch in and help with the work you must do that. I want you to be made strong and hardy, and that will help. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, now it is all arranged. Bear those things in mind," said Tom's father; and Tom knew he meant just what he said,

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"The time is getting pretty short for fun," observed Joe Weston. "In less than three weeks we'll have to get right down to work—spring is beginning to open up."

"Yes, and I've got to get back to my factory soon also. Can we get up one or two more outings before I go and the rest of you get down to business?" inquired Mr. Ralston, anxiously. "I never did have any fun before, and I like it."

"It is getting late in the season," reflected Joe, "but we might start a deer-hunt."

"The very thing. I'd like it immensely. I've never hunted anything but dollars—and they are sort of dear!" The crowd had a laugh at his little joke.

"I've never hunted deer myself," said Joe Weston, "but I reckon Uncle Jeff can get up a hunt for us. Suppose we walk down to his cabin and see him."

"We'll just do that very thing!" assented Tom Ralston; and the two boys, accompanied by Mr. Ralston, started.

"I'll stop by and hire Link, that colored boy, to come up here and take my place for a week or so; I'll pay him out of my teaching-money," said Joe.

"Wish you would," said Mr. Weston. "There's a powerful heap to do." He appeared relieved at the prospect of having help.

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"Oh, I wasn't going to leave you in the lurch and let the work on the place suffer while I am off having fun," assured Joe. "I'll pay Link out of my salary as 'professor' to Tom."

Joe, Mr. Ralston, and Tom trudged down the Pigeon Roost road the half-mile to Uncle Jeff's house, the while carrying on a lively discussion about farm crops.

"I don't think I'll be able to take that job next year, looking after your place," said Joe, finally.

"Why, what's the matter—not enough pay? I'll make it sixty dollars a month, then," Mr. Ralston announced.

"No, sir."

"Seventy?"

Joe shook his head negatively.

"It ain't the money, Mr. Ralston. I've just been thinking it over—but that looks like a lot of money to me now."

"It is very good pay for a boy of your age—"

"Age has nothing to do with it," responded Joe Weston, promptly. "I know how to farm to a certain extent. If I didn't know how you wouldn't have made that offer to me, would you?"

Mr. Ralston was surprised.

"N-no—can't say as I would." The matter

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was simmering down to a sure-enough business discussion.

"And the knowledge I have—and that means applying it—is all there is worth paying me for—isn't that true?" Joe persisted, seriously.

"That is a fact."

"And my knowledge is my capital, just like that big factory of yours and the money you have to run it is yours."

"That's a fact—no difference." The man eyed him quizzically.

"Well, now, you were telling me the other day about how you started in a little one-horse shop and kept enlarging it by putting capital back into it until it grew to what you have now."

Mr. Ralston nodded assent.

"It looks like just the same situation with me, Mr. Ralston. My knowledge is in the same fix as your factory when it started—mighty small. But I am going to build it up and make it bring me bigger returns."

"How are you going to build it, Joe?"

"Keep enlarging by putting profits back into it and branching out. I know how to grow cotton and corn; but how to make the most cotton and the most corn at the least cost, then how to turn them into the greatest profit—those are some of the things I want to know to enlarge on."

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"That is a good resolution."

"And I read once that one of the big meat-packers said that the meat he sold merely paid expenses, and the profit was in the by-products—"

"The *what?*" inquired Tom, who had been taking it all in.

"The by-products, son," answered Mr. Ralston. "For instance, saving all the hair and selling it, the bristles of pigs, making the hoofs and horns into glue, selling the hides, utilizing the blood and refuse for 'tankage,' sold for fertilizer; grinding the bones into bone-meal for fertilizer, canning the tongues, sweetbreads, and working up the trimmings into potted meat; rendering the hog fat into lard and the tallow into a cooking-compound; using the other grease in making soap—oh, worlds of ways."

"And most of the profit is there?" asked Tom.

"I am told it is. I know in my own factory some of the by-products give the largest returns," answered his father.

"So," continued Joe Weston, "I thought the same rules ought to apply to a farm: a farm is a sort of factory. The cotton and corn, the staples, ought to pay expenses. The waste and the by-products ought to make the money."

"What are they?" inquired Mr. Ralston, interested.

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"I don't know, exactly," answered Joe. "That's what I want to find out. They know more about those things up in the Middle West. Those folks have been *studying* farming for years. We have just been drifting along down here."

"How are you going to get that knowledge, Joe?"

"That's what I'm coming to—and the reason why I can't take that job from you next year. I'm going to win that state prize scholarship. It is in the biggest and most progressive agricultural school in the Central West."

"I think you're wise, Joe—to add to your capital of knowledge," said Mr. Ralston.

"I'll save most of this money you pay me for Tom, and give it to pa to hire Link in my place while I'm gone—and give him what money over what I need that I make off my corn this year to help pay for the place."

"Suppose you don't win that scholarship?" inquired Tom.

"I'm not going to fail. I am bound to win: I've made up my mind to win!" exclaimed Joe, earnestly.

"You'll win, then!" asserted Mr. Ralston, slapping him on the back, as they stopped at Uncle Jeff's front gate and called him to arrange about the deer-hunt.

CHAPTER XX

“WELL, suh, dat sho is funny!” exclaimed Uncle Jeff, when the object of the visit was explained.

“What’s funny?” inquired Joe.

“’Bout wantin’ a deer-hunt. No longer ’n las’ night Unk’ Choctaw dropped in, an’ he ’lowed he seed signs of deer down in de swamps.”

“This *is* luck!” exulted Mr. Ralston.

“Yasser, hit sho is, kaze deer is been powerful skase eroun’ here fer er coon’s age.”

“How long is that?” asked Tom.

“Oh, five or six year, I reckon. Looked like dey done all lef’ de country.”

“How about the hunt, then?” persisted Tom’s father.

“Hit ’ll be all right—*sholy* we’ll have it. Yasser, boss. W’en yo’ wanter go?”

“The sooner the better.”

“All right, den. How about day atter ter-morry?”

“Suits me.”

“And me—me too!” added Joe and Tom,

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"Well, hit's all settled, den," announced Uncle Jeff. "I'll see Unk' Choc' dis yer ve'y day, en we'll borry some more dawgs. Wid de dawgs he's got, en whut I got, en 'bout fo' mo', we'll have er fine pack."

"Is there anything more for us to do?" inquired Mr. Ralston.

"Not er thing as I knows of—jes' git yo'se'fs ready."

"What time?" asked Joe.

"Oh, long erbout fo' 'clock in de mawnin'."

"My, that's awful early!" mused Tom. "Joe, you better come over and spend the night with me."

"I'll have to. I'd never get up that early, and we haven't an alarm-clock at home."

"Well, everything is settled, then?" said Mr. Ralston.

"Yasser, en ef I lives en nuthin' happens, I'll be dar on time, me en Choc' en dem yuther niggers whut won't loan us de dawgs less'n dey's 'vited too."

"Sure; bring 'em along," suggested Joe.

"All right, den. Yo' kin look fer me 'cordin' ter de 'rangemints, widout fail."

The rest of the day at the Ralston plantation was spent in furbishing up guns and equipments and getting everything ready.

The next day was spent largely in trying to

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teach Mr. Ralston to hit something with a gun. He knew how to shoot, but Tom declared in a superior way that his father could not even hit the scenery.

"That's pretty hard on me," observed Mr. Ralston, gravely. "I'm sure I could hit a barn if it kept right still—and I was close enough," he added.

Tom was very much inclined to be patronizing in his attitude, forgetting that it was scarce six weeks since he had shot a gun for the first time himself. By incessant practice he had got to be a first-rate shot, and was very proud of it.

Joe evolved a scheme to improve Mr. Ralston's marksmanship. There was a wire clothes-line in the back yard. A tin can was hitched to a short piece of wire and this looped over the clothes-line. Then a long cord was attached to the can, and a small colored boy was stationed about a hundred feet to one side, out of danger, and given instructions to haul the line in as fast as he could when a signal was given. At right angles to the boy Mr. Ralston was stationed with his shotgun.

"Haul away!" yelled Joe. The can slid along the line toward the boy, and Mr. Ralston blazed at it first with one barrel and then with the other. All ran forward to inspect the target. He never touched it.

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"That's all right; laugh if you want to. I'll get the hang of this shooting at a moving target yet!" announced Mr. Ralston, grimly.

The boy changed directions, and hauled the other way, so as to give left and right exercise. With the second barrel Mr. Ralston hit the can!

"Oh yes, I've got it now: the scheme is to shoot just a bit in front of the object. I can make it now."

Fifty shells were expended by the enthusiastic pupil, and he had to stop on account of soreness of his shoulder, unaccustomed to the recoil of a gun. He had done very well indeed.

"Never had so much fun in my life!" he declared to the boys. "In fact, never had much fun anyhow; had to work too hard; but I like this. I'm just getting started having a good time."

"Is yo' froo fer de day?" inquired a small boy behind them. It was the boy who hauled the can.

"No, I am not. I'm going to try some more after dinner. Here's a quarter for you. Go find some more tin cans and pile 'em in that ditch down yonder. Then when we are ready to shoot, one of the boys will yell; you throw a can in the air, and I'll shoot at it. You will be safe; that gulley is deep enough for you to

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stand up in it. And I'll give you another quarter this evening."

The small darky scampered away to begin collecting the tin cans, overjoyed at the chance to make more money than he had ever dreamed was in existence.

The afternoon practice was equally as satisfactory. That night Mrs. Ralston anointed the bruised shoulder with more liniment and gave it a good rubbing.

"By George, Mary, I can hit 'em—I sure can hit 'em!" he exulted. "Yes sirree! I hit six out of every ten thrown, and for a green hand like myself that is some shooting—if I do have to say it!"

"Your arm and shoulder are going to be so sore you can't lift a gun to-morrow," predicted Mrs. Ralston. "You went at it too hard all of a sudden."

"Maybe so, but I've got the hang of it now, and maybe I won't have some fun hunting next winter!"

Everybody went to bed early in order to get a good night's rest before the hunt.

In the chill dawn Uncle Rube and Choctaw and two other negroes, accompanied by a pack of dogs, showed up at the appointed time. Major Dean concluded to go too, and he turned out in hunting-regalia with the rest of the party.

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The start was made, on foot this time, as this was to be a "drive hunt"—that is, the hunters would take their stands at favored places, and the dogs and negroes would endeavor to run the deer in that direction.

Mr. Ralston was immensely proud of Tom's prowess as a hunter, and proposed to share the "stand" with him. Sure enough, his shoulder was badly swollen, and he could not lift the heavy twelve-gage shotgun to firing position. Regretfully, he carried along a little, light sixteen-gage, and wondered if he could manage to get it to that sore shoulder in time to hit anything.

Since the bear-hunt Mr. Ralston had sent to the city and purchased two fine bowie-knives and presented them to the boys. Each wore one proudly at his belt.

The party approached the rustling cane-brakes in the faint dawn. There was considerable fog and mist in those lowlands, and progress was slow. Finally the party was placed.

Tom and his father were stationed at an eminence overlooking the long decline to Dead Man's Dump and at a point where four paths converged into the larger trail to the water of the bayou.

Mr. Ralston decided to take his stand about a hundred yards farther back, where a cross-

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trail through the cane joined one of the main ones. Joe Weston went on with Uncle Jeff and Choctaw and the negroes, and took a stand at another favorable place. Then the men with the dogs pushed on farther down the edge of the swamp to pick up the trail below and drive the game toward the hunters. The major went farther down yet, and as a seasoned deer-hunter picked his own position.

It was half or three-quarters of an hour before faintly in the distance could be heard the notes of the hunters' horn sounded by Uncle Jeff, and fainter yet the thrilling sound of dogs giving mouth on a trail. Then horn and dogs ceased to be heard, and silence reigned.

Day dawned slowly, for the sky was overcast with the rising mist. A squirrel barked in the distance and it sounded unnaturally loud. Busy little birds scarcely bigger than one's thumb scuttled around in the trees, up and down the trunks, with an utter disregard for equilibrium, calling excitedly, "Chip-chip-chip-arrp-chip!"

A pair of blue-jays squalled and quarreled from one of the cypress trees near Tom and his father. A rabbit hopped out in the path in fine shooting-distance, and Tom instinctively threw his gun to his shoulder before he remembered that the gun was loaded with buckshot and a charge of those "blue whistlers" would leave scarcely

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enough of Brer Rabbit to be worth picking up. So the rabbit departed in peace and leisure, stopping to nibble at a bit of cane here and there.

"Tom, I hear something curious over there!" called his father.

"Hush! You want to scare all the game out of the swamp?" cautioned Tom, disgustedly, in as low a voice as possible.

"But it's a strange sort of moaning and mooing—"

"Well, go see what it is, then—anything to stop this hollering. Deer will take the other direction if they hear us."

Mr. Ralston gingerly advanced around a corner of the path and was hidden from view by the tall, dense cane. Next thing Tom heard was a faint, frantic bleat.

"M-m-m-a-a-a!"

"Young calf some old wild range cow has hidden down here in this cane-brake," thought Tom, chuckling to himself at the idea of his father getting excited over a common little calf.

"Moo-oo-er! Baw-w-w-w!"

There was a noise as of an elephant crashing through the cane, and Mr. Ralston, hatless and gunless, his eyes protruding and mouth open, tore around the corner, sprinting his level best.

"Baw-w-w-w-er!" bawled the enraged mother

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cow—an old “muley,” or hornless animal, careering right behind the invader of the sylvan quiet, head down, tail up, and mad clear through.

“Ugh!” grunted Mr. Ralston, as she bunted him about ten feet along from the rear—but he lit running.

“Hey, Tom, help! Ugh!” yelled his father, ending with a heartfelt grunt as she boosted him again with all her strength.

“Ma-a-a-a!” bleated a plaintive voice behind, as a wobbly-legged little spotted calf came galloping unsteadily after its mother, who immediately thought her enemy in front was responsible for the wail of her baby, and she renewed her butting with the utmost enthusiasm.

“Hey, Tom! Hel—ugh!” grunted Mr. Ralston, galloping past and being boosted at nearly every step.

Tom was so convulsed with laughter he could hardly stand or get his breath. The cow, being hornless, could not damage his father severely, and Tom was enjoying the excruciatingly funny sight to the utmost.

What if the three thousand employees of the Ralston Iron Works could see their severe and highly respected and respectable boss now!

Mr. Ralston swerved to the left suddenly, and the cow charged on by him. She recovered quickly, wheeled, and came at him again. He

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was running toward Tom now, and Tom was in danger from the old animal, for the calf was standing near, bawling.

"Shoot 'er, Tom, shoot 'er!" gasped his father, about winded from his lively run, as he nimbly skipped behind a tree.

"Oh no. Poor old sister, she thought you were after that precious calf of hers," answered Tom, picking up a piece of limb about four feet long. He side-stepped her charge and deftly whacked Old Muley across the nose.

That was enough. It took all the fight out of her, for the nose is one of the most sensitive parts of a cow. With a dismayed snort she careered up the path, conveying her bawling offspring to the deeper recesses of the forest.

Tom leaned against the tree and laughed until he was so weak he could hardly stand. The tears ran down his face. His father stood grinning sheepishly, with disheveled hair, and rubbing himself where her hard head had been applied so forcibly.

"Better go get your gun and hat?" suggested Tom, as soon as he could control himself enough to talk.

"Look here, now, Tom. If you tell this, the folks will worry me to death—" began his father, in a wheedling tone.

"It's too good to keep!" roared Tom again.

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"Oh, say now, here—it's one on me all right—"

"I never expect to see anything as funny as long as I live," announced Tom, wiping his eyes.

"Oh, be a good sport now. Say, Tom, don't tell this on me, old fellow—"

"And what *would* the folks at the works say if they knew it?" said Tom, musingly.

"Say—gee—gosh! Now, Tom, look here—I'll buy you the best gun and hunting-outfit to be had in New Orleans if you'll keep your mouth shut—"

"It's worth a heap. Why, I can have fifty dollars' worth of fun every time I tell it!" suggested Tom.

"And—and I'll throw in a new saddle—and a watch and a hat and—anything else you want. Just name it."

"No, I guess that 'll do!" said Tom. "That's a trade."

"Honor bright, you'll not tell?"

"Sure. Better get back on your stand now."

"Heavens, no! If an old muley cow can run me all over this swamp and nearly butt me to death, the next thing a rabbit 'll come around there and kick me. No sirree, I'm going to stay here and make my son protect me—I'm too new at this hunting game!" laughed Mr. Ralston, seating himself on the gnarled root of the live-oak after recovering his hat and gun.

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Once more the forest grew still. On the breeze, as faintly as in a dream, once in a while would be heard the echo of the music of the trailing hounds.

Then there was a fusillade of shots in the distance, a wild yelping of dogs and blowing of horns, then finally stillness again.

"They've got something, sure. Sounds like that big old ten-gage gun Joe Weston] is carrying!" excitedly whispered Tom to his father.

"Not wishing you any bad luck, Tom, but considering what a rotten poor hunter I am, I'd not be sorry if no bear or deer or anything came this way. Those animals are liable to do something to me just because I'm an easy one," said Mr. Ralston.

"Oh, the hunt's not over yet, and we are going to get something—I feel it in my bones," answered Tom.

Once more a brooding silence fell over the forest. Again the cries of the hounds and the sound of the horns mingled with the voices of the negroes.

"They've taken up the hunt again!" whispered Tom.

The baying of the pack gradually became more and more distinct, and the horns could be heard clearly.

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"They are coming this way!" Tom confided, in excitement, to his father.

He unbreeched his gun to make sure that the shells were all right, and also inspected the little sixteen-gage carried by Mr. Ralston.

"Now, that gun of yours is too light to do any damage with at long range," whispered Tom, "but if a bear or deer or anything of the sort comes this way, and I get in close quarters, you jam the muzzle of that gun right against him and pull both triggers, but don't stand off at a distance and shoot—you are just as likely to get me."

"All right, I'll be careful," answered his father.

Tom drew his keen new bowie-knife, reflectively tested its edge, and, replacing it in the sheath, hitched it around so as to be handy in case of an emergency.

The voices of the dogs were now quite distinct and evidently coming closer.

Faintly there sounded a crashing and rustling through the cane some distance to the left. Tom cocked both barrels and waited, the weapon resting easily in his hands and ready to be brought to his shoulder on a second's notice.

The surging through the switch-cane ceased; instead, there was a rhythmic rustling along the path where dead leaves were lying deep—the sound, evidently, of an animal trotting.

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"That's no bear!" whispered Tom, all excitement.

"Hope it isn't another muley cow," remarked his father.

There was another rustling of leaves, and there bounded into sight around the turn of the path, not a hundred yards away, a magnificent antlered buck!

The deer saw Tom, and made a quivering bound, poised to wheel and flee into the cane. Tom let go the first barrel.

The heavy charge of buckshot went true, and shocked the deer to his haunches. He recovered, tried to rush past, and Tom planted the other charge in his side.

The deer collapsed suddenly in the path.

"I got him!" yelled Tom, in exultation, dropping his gun and rushing forward.

With a last, despairing effort the monarch of the forest staggered to his feet and charged his enemy, catching Tom fair between the branching antlers!

Together they surged, this way and that, the deer trying to throw him to the ground and gore him, but Tom kept his feet with the agility of a wrestler. With his left hand he hung desperately to the horns, and with his right he clutched for the bowie-knife at his belt.

Mr. Ralston ran forward with his gun, and

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Tom became more frightened at that than he was from the deer. He knew as long as he kept his feet the deer could not gore him, and he was afraid that in the circling struggle his father would miss the deer and shoot him.

"Leave us alone! Don't shoot!" gasped Tom. "I'll get him now!"

He reached over the horns and underneath the neck, and drew the keen bowie-knife across the neck stretched taut. He felt the blade bite the flesh; there was a whistling gush of blood, and the deer stood firm a moment; then it staggered, and sank slowly to the ground, and lay quivering in the path.

Tom dipped his forefinger in the blood and touched his forehead again.

"I've got a bear and an antlered buck. Now I'm as good a hunter of big game as anybody!" he exulted to his father, who was now excitedly waving the gun around and dancing about the deer.

"By George, fine! Fine!" he kept saying.

"Here, shoot those two loads in the air—you'll be hurting yourself or me!" Tom cautioned. "Bang! bang!" echoed the gun, and Mr. Ralston fetched a whoop.

"I wouldn't have taken the chance you did on that deer for a hundred thousand dollars!" announced Mr. Ralston, finally.

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"And I wouldn't have missed the chance for a thousand dollars!" retorted his son.

He slipped a couple of shells in his gun and, as he heard the horns in the distance blowing for a location signal, fired both barrels in the air, and then repeated.

In less than ten minutes Uncle Jeff and Uncle Rube and Choctaw and the other negroes had arrived. Their eyes opened wide when they saw the magnificent eight-pronged buck lying in the path.

"My Lawd ha' mussy!" exclaimed Uncle Jeff. "Yo' sho is de luckiest hunter I ever seed! Dat's de fust full-pronged buck deer I has seed in dese diggin's fer twenty year!"

"What was all that shooting about—anybody else get anything at all?" inquired Tom.

"Yasser, de major got er b'ar—not such er turrible big 'un, neither. He didn't fight like dat yuther 'un yo' got. Dis yer wuz er cowardly b'ar—never hurt er single dawg, en clim' er tree."

"Why was all that shooting, then?" asked Tom.

"Ter git 'im out er dat tree. He wuz so fur up de guns didn' hurt 'im much, en we didn' have time ter cut de tree down. Dat 'ar b'ar got enough lead shot inter 'im ter sink er steamboat."

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Two shots were heard in the distance.

"Dat's Mister Joe Weston—I knows de 'spression er dat gun!" said Uncle Rube.

"Yeah, dat's in de direcshun er his stand," assented Jeff.

"Wonder what he is shooting at?" mused Tom.

Two more shots were heard, then two more.

"Come on—dat's er signal ter come ter 'im!" said Rube; and they started in the direction from which the shots were heard, first discharging their own guns to let Joe know they were coming.

"Wonder why he wants us to come to him?" said Mr. Ralston.

"No tellin'. He maybe hurt; he maybe kill big game and want us to help move hit," said Choctaw, as they trotted, Indian file, along through the cane in the little trail.

Finally they fired one gun, and it was answered by a hail from Joe. He had moved a bit from his stand.

"What you got?" called Tom.

"Oh, nothing, except an old panther about as big as a calf. Old scoundrel was fixing to jump down on me from that limb yonder." Joe indicated a big, low-hanging branch of a live-oak with lots of Spanish moss drooping from it and above it. The trunk of the tree came up out of a tangle of vines.

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"Well, I vow!" Jeff surveyed the limp form of the creature. "He sho is a big 'un. Hit's a wonder he didn' git yo'."

"Just the merest accident in the world that he didn't," said Joe. "I was standing right under that oak for a long time. I never heard a thing, and the old rascal was slipping up on me all the time. He couldn't jump from the ground, on account of that thicket of vines."

"I heard a little noise over this way—may have been a rabbit or a bird in the leaves. At any rate, I walked right over there by that beech where I could see better—had my gun cocked, of course. It's about fifty feet there from here. The noise stopped, and I looked around, heard a twig drop, and I saw this old rascal crouched on that limb, his eyes fixed on me. He was just ready to spring as soon as I came back in reach."

"I did not even take aim, but fired by direction, with my gun-butt in the crook of my arm. He sprang when the shot hit him, and you see where he lies. He lit half-way the distance, and tried to spring again, and I got him in the head with the other barrel."

"You certainly have had a narrow escape!" Mr. Ralston heaved a sigh. "I had no idea that there were such creatures in these woods,"

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"Oh yes, sir, right smart of 'em," corrected Rube.

"Yo' sho is got off by de skin of yo' teef!" observed old Choctaw. "Dis ole devil would 'a' lit on yo' en put his teef in yo' froat, en drunk yo' blood—en den made dinner off'n yo' too. Yo' sho' is lucky, boy!"

"Yes, I think so," agreed Joe Weston. "It did not scare me at first, but I'm shaking yet, every time I think of the narrow escape I had."

"Well, boys, le's tie his feet tergedder en tote 'im whar dat big deer is; den we'll skin 'im. I reckon yo' wants his hide, don't yo', Mister Joe?"

"I sure do."

"Here, one of you boys hoof it back to the house and tell the lot-boy to hitch up the spring-wagon and come as far down in the swamp as he can. We've got to get that bear and deer home. Here's a dollar—hurry, now!"

Mr. Ralston handed the coin to one of the strange negroes who had contributed dogs to the pack, and the darky started on a trot for the house two miles distant.

The feet of the panther were tied together, a stout pole was cut, and the animal slung on it. Then the ends of the pole were hoisted onto the shoulders of the negroes. Arriving at the place

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where the deer was, signal guns were fired to locate Major Dean.

No answer.

"Come on! We got to go down dar—got to bring dat b'ar in too. I never seed de like er game we's gittin' dis day!" observed Jeff.

After a quarter-of-a-mile pull through the cane the party came out at the spot where the major had killed the bear. The bear was there still; and on a dry hillock, on a bed of Spanish moss he had pulled from the low-hanging branches, was the major, snoozing comfortably!

"Hey, there, wake up!" said Mr. Ralston, prodding him with his foot.

"What—huh—hey—Yankees comin'? Oh!" The major sat up and grinned foolishly.

"Lordy me! I thought for a minute it was war-times again. I dozed off and heard a lot of shooting, and I was dreaming I was up in Virginia again and resting after an engagement. And I thought the Yanks were about to get me!" The jolly old fellow joined in the laugh at his own expense. He was amazed to hear of Joe's adventure with the panther and the luck Tom had had with the deer.

"We've certainly got to have a barbecue, with all this venison and bear meat!" he announced. "Soon's we get the meat dressed and at home,

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I'll make the arrangements. Never seen or been at a barbecue, have you Tom—you and Mr. Ralston?" They shook their heads in negation. "Well, anybody who hasn't eaten barbecued meat has something to live for. And, speaking of eating, let's be getting toward home. I'm hungry." It was two o'clock.

"I'm ready," announced Mr. Ralston.

"Me, too—and me!" added the boys.

"There's a short cut through here—save us half a mile going home. I know these swamps like I do the inside of the house. You niggers get that meat ready and skin that panther, and I'll go have a shote pig slaughtered and have the fires started in the pits, and to-morrow we'll have a barbecue right," said the major.

The darkies started back to the assembly point with the bear, which was a half-grown cub, and the other hunters followed the major as he deftly threaded his way out of the thicket of cane and toward the open fields.

CHAPTER XXI

EVERYBODY slept late next morning except the major. That seasoned veteran of many a hunt was up in the early dawn, making further arrangements for the barbecue.

"Well, the meat's on!" he announced, coming back to the house as the party was assembling for a very late breakfast.

"What I'm interested in is breakfast right now," said Mr. Ralston. "Never slept as soundly in my life—and never was as hungry as I am right now."

"Better go slow on the breakfast, all you hunters, so you can do full justice to the barbecue," cautioned the major. "This is an extra-fine barbecue—big variety of stuff. I've taken the liberty of inviting some of your neighbors, Mr. Ralston. You ought to meet them."

"Glad you did. There is plenty for all."

"There certainly is. I sent to town and got a whole half-side of a beef, and a good mutton, too. Thought we might's well make a complete job of it."

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"That's right," assented Mr. Ralston. "We'll have a regular picnic dinner."

"Did you let my folks know, Major?" inquired Joe Weston, solicitously.

"The very first ones, Joe, and Mr. Weston and Mrs. Weston and Annie said they'd be over without fail."

"You didn't say anything about that panther, did you?" asked Joe. "It might worry mother," he added, thoughtfully.

"Nothing more than that you had killed the biggest panther seen around here in twenty years."

"That's all right, then," said Joe, relieved.

"I certainly do hate to leave this table," sighed Tom, regretfully, "but I s'pose I'd better. If I don't, I'll weaken and fill up on waffles and such junk when I ought to save that room for the barbecue."

"Good idea. Think I'll do the same," said his father.

"Let's go down and see how they are getting along?" suggested Joe. No sooner was the suggestion made than acted upon.

It was a fine, crisp day outside. The breeze was laden with the most delectable odors of the cooking meats as the party strolled to the scene of the festivities that were to be.

Alfred, an old negro celebrated in that section

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as a barbecue cook, was in charge of the affair. He had half a dozen darkies assisting him, and they in turn were assisted by negro boys and girls as "basters." Each had a cane about five feet long with a rag swab fastened to one end. This they dipped into the aromatic basting compound and kept the meat, slowly cooking above the bed of coals, well covered with it, preventing the meat from getting dry, and giving the proper seasoning.

"Well, how's everything?" inquired Mr. Ralston of Alfred.

"Fine, sah; fine!" he responded, with enthusiasm. "I ain't never seen a fatter lot of venison, en dat b'ar meat is fat an' tender too. I'm cookin' 'em slow so hit won't be dried up, en I ain' sparin' de dressin' on 'em."

Tom sniffed hungrily and looked for evidences of being ready to serve the meats.

"What time are we going to get a chance to eat some of this?" he demanded. The smell of the roasting dainties made him hungry, sure enough.

"We'll start servin' erbout one er'clock, sah!" answered Alfred, grandly.

"Great goodness, and it's only a bit after ten now! How are we going to stand it, Tom?"

"I dunno," said Tom, hopelessly. "If I stay around here I'll be tempted to snatch some of

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that cooking meat, and if I go to the house I'll be sure to fill up on biscuits and such. Let's take a walk!"

"Good idea," said Joe. "We'll just run away from it. We'll walk over home and come back with my folks, and I'll have a chance to tell mother about that panther without getting her so scared she'll be nervous every time we go hunting."

It was almost dinner-time when they returned, accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. Weston and Annie. Mrs. Ralston and the two little girls met Mrs. Weston, and the major was explaining to Mrs. Ralston and the girls about the barbecue.

"You never saw one before, did you, Mrs. Ralston?" asked the major.

"No, never. You see, I've lived in a city all my life—"

"Well, you get back to the first principles of cooking here. These pits, which look like big graves, were filled with dry cord-wood yesterday afternoon and fires started, and kept going all night. That left them over half full of coals this morning—no smoke at all.

"Then I sent out and had those saplings cut, the bark scraped off, and laid across. Just put the whole half a beef or mutton or venison on the poles across the mouth of the pit half full of coals; keep it basted constantly to season and

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prevent its drying out. Keep the meat turned often so it cooks evenly all through—and there you are.”

“Is it so much better than meat cooked in a stove?” inquired Mrs. Ralston.

“It certainly is,” responded Mrs. Weston. “I don’t know why, but it is. Has an entirely different flavor and a better flavor, as you will say when you taste it.”

“I’m about ready now!” said Mrs. Ralston, sniffing the mouth-watering odors.

The meat was pronounced done by the cook. Coffee-pots were boiling, and there was plenty of light bread and pickles. Plates and table-ware had been sent down from the house for the use of the guests. The negroes were contented with wooden pickle dishes and their fingers and pocket-knives.

On each plate was a portion of each sort of meat, all cooked to perfection. The guests ate until they could eat no more. Mr. Ralston said it was the best meat he had ever tasted, and his wife echoed his opinion; and as for Tom, he announced he would not stop until he had to.

The major played a mean trick on Tom. He went to the serving-table and returned with a fine, juicy portion of rib and handed it to him.

“Let’s see how you like deer meat,” he said. Tom attacked it with enthusiasm.

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"Best of all. Has a different flavor, hasn't it? This is the finest meat yet—why don't the rest of you get some? I think deer meat is fine!" he exulted.

"Well, I just wanted to see what you would say. That's mutton, Tom, and those bones on the left side of your plate are where you cleaned up your piece of venison the first thing!"

There was a shout of laughter at Tom's expense. He grinned and licked his fingers.

"I don't care; it was good. It's all so good that the last piece you eat tastes like the best. Gimme a piece of bear now—sure-enough bear—not roast pork!" he said.

There was plenty of the meat saved for supper, the neighbors were given some to take home, and the negroes were turned loose of the rest, and there was a plenty for them, too. After the coffee was served, black and strong and made by Alfred's wife, who had been for years a cook in New Orleans and knew how to make the real thing in the way of coffee, the white folks adjourned to the "big house," leaving the happy darkies to eat in contentment.

"Well, this is about as nice a barbecue as I ever had," said Major Dean, "and we always have one here every year. Those old pits down in the grove were dug thirty years ago or more. We clean 'em out every year."

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"I'll just leave them as they are, then," said Mr. Ralston.

"Wish you wouldn't go away, Major," said Tom.

"Why should you? Your room is here, and this is your house as long as you care to have it," said Mr. Ralston.

"Much obliged for that, and I'll consider it that way. You see, I'm getting along in years, and it was too lonely for an old fellow like me here by myself in this big house. Then, I'm pretty well fixed, and I wanted to travel around a bit, and couldn't do that as long as I had the place on my hands to look after."

"I certainly hope you'll make headquarters here. It will make me feel more contented when I have to go back North," said the new owner of the plantation.

"I'll be here, Ralston, a good deal more than I will be away," assured the major. "It is hard to break the habits of a lifetime."

"Well, we'd better be making arrangements now for our last frolic," said Joe Weston. "I've got to get to work on the place by the middle of next week. This is Saturday."

"What can we do to crowd as much fun as possible in three days?" asked Tom Ralston.

"Oh, we can do a lot in that time, Go

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hunting Monday and have a bird supper, for one thing," suggested Joe.

"That's a fine idea," assented Mr. Ralston. "We'll just do that. I want a chance to shoot at some live birds—something that moves faster than a tin can—"

"A muley cow, for instance!" slyly suggested Tom.

His father gulped hard, then began to turn red and stared at him. He thought Tom was going to give the thing away.

"A *what*?" asked Joe.

"Muley cow. I saw one once that beat anything for moving fast I've seen yet. A cow would be about the right size target for father!" Mr. Ralston breathed freely, but Tom had given him an awful scare. Tom cut his eye around at his parent, who eyed him reproachfully and had a dry grin on his face.

"Well, now, that hunt will take up Monday. What can we do Tuesday?"

"Suppose we all go out Tuesday down to the lake and camp and fish and try to get some wild turkey and squirrel and have a Brunswick stew?" suggested the major. "That always was one of my favorite trips. We can spend the night in that hunting-lodge I have, and come back Wednesday."

"The very thing!" said Tom and Joe.

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"Are fish biting now?" inquired Mr. Ralston.

"Oh yes; we can get white perch and trout. May be able to catch some bream, too—no telling," said the major.

Monday morning, early, Joe assumed charge of the situation. He called in five little negroes from the servants' quarters back of the hill and put them to turning over old logs, raking up leaves, and poking about in likely covered places, catching crickets. The lively little insects were placed in a box covered with wire gauze and given a lot of unsalted cracker crumbs and Irish-potato peelings to eat. Otherwise they would have begun making their meals off one another.

"Here, you, Wesley, take that spade and go down in the garden and get us some fishing-worms," directed Joe; and Wesley went shambling off on his errand.

"Now, Tom, we've arranged about the bait; let's get our guns and go see if we can't get a partridge or two on our own account," Joe suggested. "The major and your father and Uncle Rube have gone on a hunt below here. We'll strike out in a different direction."

"What good are those crickets?" inquired Tom, as they cut across the fields, gun on shoulder. "I thought worms were best to fish with."

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"Crickets are the best bait yet for goggle-eye and blue-bellied bream," explained Joe, "but I don't propose to take any chances. If the fish are biting at all, they will bite either crickets or worms. Now, white perch will not bite either; they must have the minnows. We'll take that glass minnow trap along too, and a minnow-seine as well."

"We'll be certain to have bait, won't we? Are there any birds down at the lake?" inquired Tom. Since he had got so he could kill them he was anxious to hunt all the time.

"No, it's all thickets and woods. I expect we'd better get some for that Brunswick stew in case we have bad luck getting squirrels. Then if we get the squirrels it will be all the better."

"Sure, it's a good idea. I'll guarantee they'll be eaten," said Tom, with enthusiasm.

After a three hours' hunt the boys secured a dozen plump partridges. Returning to the house, Tom handed them to Aunt Dicey, the cook.

"Pick and clean these birds, Aunt Dicey. Put them on ice, and when we get ready to start wrap them up carefully in a cloth wrung out in salty ice-water and pack them in some cracked ice and salt in a tin bucket with a tight top. Fix 'em up all right, and I'll give you two

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bits—and when you get married again I'll send you a wedding present."

"Look yere, boy. Who's yo' talkin' to? Me?" inquired Aunt Dicey, with awful dignity, placing both of her hands on her fat hips and glaring.

"No; you. Who'd you s'pose I was talking to?"

"Lemme tell yo' som'p'n, chile. Dey's er ole sayin' dat de scalded houn' dreads de skillet de hot grease come outen. I been married ter dat triflin' ole reskel, Jeff, nigh onto fawty yeah, en ef I ever does git loose I boun' I knows whut's good fer me. Naw, suh, don' yo' be savin' no weddin' presents fer me!" She swelled with wrath.

"Why, what's the matter, Aunt Dicey?" inquired Joe, near to bursting with laughter.

"Jes' look at dat outdacious ole scoun'l 'sleep yander in de sun, an' me ain' got er stick er stove-wood in de kitchen! Whut sort of a husban' is dat, nowhow? Would yo' have dat sort of er thing fer er husban', huh?"

"No, I don't think I would—really," answered Tom, with a straight face, although he was about to explode.

"I got er good min' ter go peel him side de haid wid dis yere piece er stove-wood," said Aunt Dicey, her wrath rising as she contem-

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plated Jeff snoring happily against the sunny side of the house.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," suggested Joe Weston. "I expect he's tired."

"Ya-a-s, I reckon he *is* tired—bawn dat 'ere way en backslided every day er his life."

"Well, here's a quarter for you. Joe and I will bring you in some wood—"

"Thanky, suh, thanky. I's done got too portly ter be stoopin' over pickin' up wood."

"You reckon he is just afraid of work?" inquired Joe, with a wink at Tom, to start her again.

"Yasser, he's jes' nacherally triflin'. Why, yo' know whut dat nigger done wunst? Hit wuz w'en we fust got ma'ied en I didn' have no better sense dan ter b'lieve 'im.

"I axes 'im one day ter go split me some stove-wood. I waits, en no wood. I goes en looks out, en dar he sits on dat ole cypress stump right down yonner at de hawse-pawn, wid er fishin'-pole in his hand.

"I names dat stove-wood ter 'im ergin, en he say Marse Bob Dean tole 'im ter try ter catch 'im er mess er catfish outen dat pawn fer supper, en he done fergot hit twell den.

"I goes on en splits de wood. 'Bout free days later he tells me de same thing fer er excuse. Den hit come over me all of er suddint. Dat

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pawn dries up every summer, en dey ain' nothin' no bigger'n er tadpole ever been in hit!

"Man! I sho gits mad. Dey wuz er bar'l-stave by de do', en I picks hit up en hides it in de fold er mer dress, en den I sashays down dar, lookin' pleasant ez er basket er chips.

"Any luck, hun?' I says, real sweet.

"Yeah—done got several bites. Yo' better go on en split dat wood,' sezze, 'kaze hit's gwine take me all evenin' here.'

"I reaches over, accidental like, en lifts dat pole, en he didn' have no mo' hook on hit dan er rabbit!

"Blam!' I brung dat bar'l-stave down er-cross his haid, en de stave split in mer hands. He turned his haid quick, en seed de jig wuz up." She guffawed in joy at the recollection.

"He says, 'Don't!' jes lak er big ole bullfrog says 'Ick!' w'en he jumps; den dat nigger jumped inter de pawn all spraddled out lak er big black bullfrog hese'f. Hit warn' but waist-deep, but hit wuz col'. He wades out ter de middle, en he knowed he wuz safe.

"He started roun t'other side, en I headed him off. I shore gin 'im er piece of my min'. He wuz skeered ter come out, kaze he knowed whut I wuz gwine ter do ter 'im.

"I kep' 'im in dat water fer one hour twell he wuz mos' friz. Den I let 'im out en 'scorted

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'im ter de wood-pile. He wanted ter git ter de fire ter warm. I tole 'im de exercise er splittin' wood wuz de bes' warmin' thing I knowed of except er skillet er hot grease he wuz liable ter git th'o'ed on 'im ef he come in dat kitchen widout er armful er wood each time. He fotch er plenty in, en hit sorter broke 'im er imposin' on me—but he's powerful wufless—powerful wufless."

She retired into the kitchen with the birds, shaking her head dolefully over the worthlessness of her husband; and the boys, choking with laughter every time they looked at the peaceful object of her tirade, filled the wood-box for her.

CHAPTER XXII

THE major, Mr. Ralston, and Uncle Rube returned with a fine bag of birds later in the afternoon. Rube undertook the duty of picking and cleaning them, and that night for supper they had broiled quail and smothered quail, with plenty of gravy and toast to put it on.

"And I killed four of 'em myself! Just think of it—four of 'em! And they were hard shots, too. I'll bet you couldn't have hit 'em!" exulted Mr. Ralston to Tom.

"I got six of the dozen Joe and I got," retorted Tom.

"Did you shoot 'em on the ground?" inquired his father, banteringly.

"No, I didn't," snapped Tom, getting red in the face at the reflections on his ability as a hunter.

"Bet they were sick or crippled or couldn't fly!" continued his father, banteringly.

"Not a bit more sick than a certain black muley cow I know of," wrathfully observed Tom, with a dangerous light in his eyes.

If somebody had soused a bucket of cold

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water on Mr. Ralston he could not have changed more quickly. He gulped and swallowed hard.

"Oh, I was just joking you, son!" he observed.

"That's all right, then," said Tom, cooling gradually. "Enough is enough, and I've got a little joke of my own, too!"

"What is that, Tom? That's twice you've made a break about a cow. What is it?" inquired the major, who dearly loved a joke on some one.

"Oh, nothing—just a little private joke of our own," said Tom. He had no idea of giving it away yet; and, besides, he wanted those things his father had promised him.

There was another early scattering to bed, and at six o'clock the party was ready. Two extra seats were put in the spring-wagon for the fishermen to ride in, and Uncle Jeff followed in the heavy wagon with the camp equipment, poles and such.

It was eight miles to Lost River, as the lake was called, and the ride in the early morning was delightful.

There were great green live-oaks, with limbs thirty and fifty feet long, shading the sandy road. Festooned on twigs and branches were pendulous masses of the gray Spanish moss swaying in each passing breeze, and deriving its sustenance from the moist air. There were great palmetto bushes, each leaf an exaggerated

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palm-leaf fan, only they were green and tropical-looking. Vines, bright with scarlet berries, twisted in and out among the bushes and clung to the trunks of trees. Here and there a holly, all red and green, brought to mind Christmas and the holiday season. Many of the black-gum and oak trees had immense masses of mistletoe growing on them. The frost had touched the leaves until they were a riot of crimson and yellow and bronze.

There were strange, sweet scents burdening the air—subtle and mysterious. Blue-jays flashed like streaks of blue flame from bough to bough. Crimson cardinals whistled a merry melody from roadside coverts.

The party halted after a long ride down an almost obliterated woods road, which ended on a little plateau, perfectly level and shaded by beech and magnolia trees. There was a two-room plank bungalow, with wide front and back porches, and a twelve-foot hall between the two rooms. In a small ravine to the right a spring gushed forth from under the roots of an immense bay tree.

Farther down, the lake wound around, bordered by cypress trees and the strange "knees" of the cypress and thickets of hazel and bay and gum.

"Why, it looks like a river instead of a lake!" exclaimed Tom.

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"That's what it is—or was," said the major. "In the past, seventy or eighty years ago, this was the original bed of the river. One 'high-water' the current just cut right through Nine-Mile Bend and left the old bed here and took an entirely new course. That is why this lake is called 'Lost River.'"

"Well, what keeps it full of water?"

"River gets through these swamps every spring, and then there are many little streams feeding it, such as come from our spring over there."

"Look here, folks; if we're going to have any fish for dinner, it strikes me we'd better be getting busy?" suggested Joe Weston.

"Sensible, as usual, Joe!" said Mr. Ralston. "I want to catch a fish myself. That's something else I never have done."

"Well, now we want to divide this thing up so we'll be certain of game. It won't do for all of us to do the same thing. Who is going to fish?"

"I!" said Mr. Ralston.

"I, too!" said Tom.

"All right; I'll show you two about the fishing. Joe, soon's the niggers take the mules out and feed 'em you go with Jeff and Rube and see if you can't get some squirrels for the Brunswick stew or for supper."

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Down the steep bank and into a boat the major and Mr. Ralston and Tom went. The poles were light, dry canes, small and pliant, so as not to tire the wrist in holding them; the lines were of the finest, lightest silk, and the floats were the quill end of goose feathers, about eight inches long. As a sinker there was a small "BB" shot on each line, barely enough to take the bait and hook under.

"Now don't make any noise—fish are mighty scary things," cautioned the major. "And watch how and where I fish, and do the same way."

Stringing a fine, fat cricket on his hook, he paddled slowly across the lake to where there was a pile of driftwood and] leaves and chips in among the cypress knees and trunks. He dropped the bait so quietly in between two of the cypress trunks, standing in about three feet of water, that it made scarcely a ripple. The quill lay on the surface of the water like some bit of floating stick.

There was a premonitory quiver, a couple of slight dips of the end toward the hook; the quill straightened up, and then suddenly disappeared slantwise under the water. With a slight twist of his wrist, communicated to the limber pole, the major tightened the line. The tip of the pole bent, and for a moment under

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the surface of the water he played the surging fish. Then with a mighty flapping and splashing a red-and-blue beauty, almost as broad as one's two hands, was fluttering in the boat.

"By George, he's a nice one! That's what we call a blue bream down here—sweetest fish we have, in flavor. Now, one of you drop your line in the same place, and the other fish by that stump. I'll try it ahead here."

He had moored the boat by the chain to the limb of an overhanging cypress.

As long as he lives Tom will never forget his excitement as the quill went under, the line tautened, and he felt the electric thrill as the fish rushed through the water, bending the tip of the pliable pole.

"Hi yi! You've got him—you got him! Don't jerk—you'll tear the hook from his mouth! Lift steady!" The major was as excited as he was.

The fish was yellow on the belly and dark above, with deep-blue side-fins and blue gills—a beautiful specimen, almost as big as the first one.

"That is what we call the willow bream, Tom. Come on, now, let's get a good string of 'em. They are biting fine. When one bites you can bank on there being more of them about the same place. They seem to run in schools to a certain extent."

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Next Mr. Ralston caught one, and was more excited than Tom was. Then the major got another, and so on. Finally, two shots were heard in the woods to their left.

"I'll be willing to eat my last summer hat without sugar or cream if we haven't got two squirrels for the stew, anyway. That's Jeff's gun, and he's a mighty squirrel-hunter," said the major. Two more reports made the woods reverberate. "There's that twelve-gage Joe is shooting—squirrels must be plentiful as fish. Well, we've got to tote our end of the rail too, now, for more fish!" When the hunters shouted from the shore the fishermen had fished along the bank for a quarter of a mile up the lake and had thirty-five fine ones trailing along behind the boat, strung on a stout cord.

"I guess we've enough for dinner—hey?" inquired Mr. Ralston, trying to lift them out of the water, admiringly.

"Yes, and I can eat about four of 'em!" said Tom.

The major pulled the boat back to the camp landing, and the fine catch of fish was taken up. Joe and Jeff had got in, Jeff with six squirrels, Joe with three, and Uncle Rube yet to hear from.

"We aren't going to starve—that's certain!" gleefully observed Joe, beholding the string of fish.

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Down at the spring branch, near where it flowed into the lake, the fishermen began scaling and cleaning their fish for the pan. Jeff had started a fire, filled the coffee-pot with water, and set it on to get ready for the coffee, and then he and Joe came down to the branch and began to clean their squirrels.

Jeff found three brickbats, left from building the chimney of the bungalow. These he set triangularly in the bed of coals, and on them placed the deep frying-pan half full of lard.

He got out the salt and pepper and corn-meal. Each fish was salted and seasoned, rolled in the meal, and, when the lard was smoking and boiling hot, laid in the grease. There was a tremendous spluttering and sizzling, and two more were placed in the pan; then when they had cooked to a beautiful golden brown they were taken from the grease and laid on a plank to drain and cool.

Then the skillet, which looked like a frying-pan, only it did not have deep sides, was placed on the coals, and the major mixed some corn-meal with scalding water and salted it liberally. This he made into pones with his hands, and placed them on the skillet.

Uncle Rube emerged from the forest at this time, bearing an immense wild turkey-gobbler and five more squirrels. The late dinner was

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ready, and the hungry hunters fell to with a vim.

"Look hyar, Rube, dey ain' gwine be ernuff fishes wid dese hongry folks eatin' like dey is. Run down ter de branch en clean er half er dozen or so mo'. Gotter do hit if me en you is gwine ter eat fish. Fetch 'em up here, an' I'll fry 'em."

Tom watched Joe and Uncle Jeff skin the squirrels. A cut was made crosswise of the middle of the squirrel's back and running around the body. Joe would insert the first two fingers of each hand under the skin at one end of the cut: Uncle Jeff would do the same, and both would pull at the same time. The hide would slip off as neatly as a glove from the hand.

Two of the squirrels were of the red or "fox" variety, and Tom admired them very much indeed. Joe cut off the beautiful bushy tails and handed them to him.

"We'll fix those up for you to take back as souvenirs of your trip," he said.

"I won't need any reminder, Joe, but I'll be glad to have them just the same. They will make fine ornaments for my room."

Quickly the feet were cut off the squirrels; they were drawn and washed, the ears trimmed off the heads, and the party was glad to answer the call of "Supper!" from the cook.

"You don't cook the heads, do you?" inquired

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Tom, looking at the tin bucket of cleaned squirrels, which had been salted and packed in the bucket. Jeff was putting the top on, and was going to sink it in the icy water to keep the meat fresh until morning.

"Dat's de bestest part of 'em," announced Uncle Jeff, with conviction. "Dem squir'l brains is de mos' delicatest part whut is—en 'sides dat, ef er pusson eats 'em reg'lar dey makes dat pusson des es cute en nimble es er squir'l hisse'f. En de tongue is mighty fine too, en dey's er powerful sweet bite er meat on each jaw."

The three hurried to the camp-fire, where supper was ready. In all his life, Tom had never tasted anything as good as that corn-dodger and fried fish and black coffee. He got away with three of the big fish, two tin cups of coffee, and two sizable chunks of corn-bread. There were no knives or forks; each hunter took his fish in his fingers and returned to primitive ways.

"Got enough?" inquired Joe Weston, with a smile, as Tom heaved a big sigh and leaned back against the live-oak on whose gnarled roots he was sitting.

"No, I haven't; but I haven't room for any more!" answered Tom, regretfully.

For about an hour the party sat about the fire talking and planning other trips. Finally, the major rose and yawned.

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"Well, folks, le's get our blankets and get ready for sleep before we get so drowsy we haven't any sense left. I'm mighty near that now. We'll all sleep inside; it is too chilly and damp out here on the ground. Jeff, start us a blaze in the fireplace of each room!"

With his coat for a pillow, each boy rolled up in his blanket on the floor. Mr. Ralston and the major slept in one room, the two boys and the two old negroes in the other.

A great owl hooted from across the lake, answered by another in the mysterious depths of the wood beyond. There were resounding splashings and flappings from the water below as some giant gar or grinnell leaped for its prey. There were eery chirps and chatterings from the trees as bats squeaked and gibbered about in the dark. A little screech-owl mewed shiveringly, monotonously, from a giant magnolia tree near by. One of the negro men was asleep, and Joe Weston was just dozing into dreamland when faintly in the distance came the cry of some woman in distress—a blood-curdling wail. It sounded again—and again!

Tom and Joe leaped to their feet and reached for their guns.

"Whar yo' boys gwine?" inquired Uncle Jeff, sitting up.

"Don't you hear that woman screaming down

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there in the swamp? Hear that?" said Tom. The cry rang out again.

"Yeah—I hears hit," said Jeff, without enthusiasm.

"We must go to her. She is in some awful danger!" exclaimed Tom, starting for the door.

"That woman is lost in the swamp. We've no time to lose—come on!" urged Joe Weston, slipping on his coat.

"Ooman nothin'!" snorted Uncle Jeff. "Dat's er great big ole painter—same as yo' killed, Marse Joe. Dat's all. Dey's several of 'em in dese hyar swamps yit. Dat varmint smells de fish we been cookin' en whar we been cleanin' dem squir'ls."

"You sure?" inquired Joe Weston. He had never heard the cry of a panther before.

"Jes' es sure as if hit wuz mer ole lady callin' me. I done hearn too many of 'em—I reckernizes de voice. I'll jes slip' er couple er buck-shot shells in dis gun in case ole Mis' Painter comes er yowlin' eroun' hyar; den I give 'er somethin' ter yowl erbout."

"They must be dreadfully dangerous?" inquired Tom, resuming his blanket again.

"Dey is. Dey is de sneakin'est, slyest, mos' dangerousest animule whut is," emphatically asserted Uncle Jeff. "Dey'll slip en slide en foller er pusson fer hours, en run erhead of a man when

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dey fines out whut road he's gwine take, den climbs a tree wid ^{ter}er limb hangin' over de road.

"Den w'en yo' passes under—blip! Dat painter jumps an' is right on yer, teef in yo' neck an' a-drinkin' of yo' blood. I sure hates dem varmints."

The panther called once or twice faintly in the distance, and was evidently retreating from the camp. The owl resumed his hooting, and snores from Rube and Uncle Jeff indicated to the boys that it was time for them to be getting some sleep also. They drifted off into dreamy unconsciousness.

"My goodness erlive! Is yo' all gwine sleep *all* day?" Uncle Jeff shook them vigorously.

"Wh-what time is it?" inquired Joe, yawning.

"Where's the panther?" demanded Tom, springing to his feet and looking dazedly at the old darky.

"Painter nuthin'—hit's time fer yo' all ter be gittin' some fishes fer bre'kfus'. Ef yo' doan' git no fish—no bre'kfus'. We ain' brung no grub; we is sho 'nough hunters, en 'pen's on whut we kills en catches."

"Well, suppose we can't catch any fish, Uncle Jeff?" Tom was appalled at the possibility of no breakfast—and an empty feeling in his stomach already.

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"Dat ain' de queschun—yo' is jes' *bleeged* ter git fish."

"I reckon we'll have to get them some way, then," said Joe to Tom.

"De bes' way I knows of is ter git down on de lake an' fish fer 'em," suggested Jeff, dryly. "Dese hyar fishes in dis lake don't come er-floppin' up de bank an' inter de fryin'-pan widout no invite whatsomever. Dey has ter be invited wid er hook en line."

The boys stepped out of the door into what appeared to be a sea of milk. A dense fog overlaid everything.

"Hit's five er'clock, dat's whut hit is. Hyar, drink dis yer cup er cawfee—hit 'll keep de malariousness outen yo' bones." The hot, black coffee tasted pretty good. Uncle Jeff had been up an hour, and had made a fresh pot of it, a hot hoe-cake, and had a couple of the fried fish from the night before ready for the boys.

"Dis ain' bre'kfus', min' yo'; dis is jes' er snack. Now y'all git down dere wid dem crickets en w'ums en fish clost ter de bank. De goggle-eyes is feedin' early in de mawnin', en speshly eroun' de cypress knees. Don' make no noise, en keep yo' moufs shet."

"Can fishes hear?" asked Tom, his mouth full of hoe-cake.

"Ain' none of 'em ever *tole* me dey could, but

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I inginnerally notices dat de folks whut talks mos' fishin' gits de leastest fish."

"Even out of a horse-pond?" inquired Joe Weston, mischievously.

Uncle Jeff guffawed. "She tole yo' erbout dat, did she? Haw, haw, haw! Hit wuz er good scheme ez long ez hit lasted. Go on, now. I ain' got time to projeck wid yo' young uns."

"Hadn't you better wake Mr. Ralston and the major?"

"Law me, yo' boys thinks yo' is smart, but dem ole fellers is been up er hour ahead o' yo', en gone in de woods atter squir'ls en tuckys. Go on, now, en git in dat boat. I gotter go down ter de spring en trim up dem squir'ls en patteridges, en git dat Brunswick sorter started."

The boys were soon in the boat, each one fishing on his own account. By following the directions of the old negro they found the bream were voracious. In less than an hour Tom had ten fine ones and Joe Weston twelve.

"Better bring dem fishes on up hyar, if yo' has any, an' wants bre'kfus' an' 'spec's ter eat any 'fore evenin'."

A savory smell assailed their senses as they approached the camp. The big pot was steaming merrily. Uncle Rube was tending the fire, and Jeff had a quizzical look in his eye.

"Rube slipped out ahead of all of us, en got

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er half-dozen mo' squir'ls way back of camp, en we kin have dem we wuz savin' fer de Brunswick stew fer bre'kfus'. Rube, better go clean dem squir'ls now en put 'em in de freezerator in de spring branch. No game ain' good wid de heat in hit."

"Come on, Tom; I guess it is up to us to clean our fish, too," suggested Joe Weston.

"Now," said Uncle Jeff, approvingly, "dat's de way fer er sho-'nuff spotesman ter do on er trip—not jes' want ter eat all de time en do no wuck. Hurry up wid de fish!"

It was not long before the fish were scaled, cleaned, and ready for the pan. The squirrels had been put on in the pot with a few slices of smoked bacon, some chopped onion, a bay leaf or two pulled from a near-by bush to flavor, and plenty of black pepper, red pepper, and salt. Some flour had been browned in a tin plate, and after a few tablespoonfuls of vinegar were added to the simmering delicacy the browned flour was stirred in to thicken the gravy, and the pot set to one side over a bed of coals, where it was simmering gently.

Rube came up from the spring, and at a nod from Jeff reached for his hunting-horn and waked the echoes with its music. He waited, and two shots were barely heard in the distance.

"Dat's dem! Dey heered us. Dey'll be erlong

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torreckly, en I reckon yo' young gennelmuns is hongry. Have some er dis yere smothered squir'l en er fish?" Rube was assisting in dishing out the delightful delicacy. A bountiful helping soon disappeared, helped by swabs of corn-bread in the gravy and washed down by the black nectar brewed in the coffee-pot.

Tom Ralston at first eyed the dusty-looking piece of corn-bread askance.

"What is this?" he inquired.

"Taste it!" urged Joe Weston. It had even a better flavor than that made the night before.

"It's bully—and goes fine with this gravy!" said Tom.

"Yo' axed whut it is. Dat is er jinnywine nigger hoe-cake," announced Uncle Jeff, with pride. "Yo' like it?"

"You bet!" said Tom, swabbing up more gravy with a piece of it. "Best corn-bread I ever tasted."

"In de fust place, hit's made outer home-ground cawn-meal whut ain' had de life bolted out of hit an' has got some suption lef' in hit. Dis stuff yo' git outen de sto's ain'. I jes' es soon eat san'."

"Why do you call it a hoe-cake?" asked Tom.

"De pore folks whut didn' use ter have no skillits use ter put de hoe in de ashes, den put

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de dough on de hoe-blade an' bake hit dat way, kivered wid hot ashes. I baked dis on de skillit, but dey ain' no reel diff'runce."

The major and Mr. Ralston came puffing up, laden with squirrels and a wild turkey each. After breakfast a consultation was held as to what would be done next.

The major and Mr. Ralston decided they would go down on the lake and fish for white perch and trout, they biting best in the middle of the day. Tom concluded he would fish also. Joe Weston said he would go into the woods and try to bag a few more squirrels, as he wanted to take some back to his mother; and thus the party was arranged.

Tom, however, did not go out on the lake. He was intensely interested in the making of the Brunswick stew, and he hung around waiting to see how it was done. Uncle Jeff, as high priest of the occasion, began his preparations. He scrubbed the five-gallon pot thoroughly, had Rube bring a plenty of wood, and fill the pot nearly to the brim with spring water.

Then the squirrels were cut up, disjointing the legs, cutting off the heads, and the backs were divided into three pieces. All pieces were well salted and put into the pot. After about half an hour of boiling the scum on the top of the water was carefully skimmed off, and the

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partridges were dropped in whole, and eight thick slices of smoked bacon were minced fine and added to the mixture, which was boiling slowly.

All the time the pot was kept boiling slowly but steadily. From under the wagon-seat Uncle Jeff brought forth two cans of sweet corn and two cans of tomatoes. Four big onions were chopped fine and added, a clove or two of garlic, a couple of bay leaves, three pods of red pepper, a teaspoonful of black pepper, and a tablespoonful of salt. Six large Irish potatoes were cut in bits and placed in the pot, which was now almost brimming full. Jeff turned with an air of triumph to Tom.

"Dar she is!" he exclaimed. "Now, some folkses don't do jes' like I does, but when I kin git some fishes I inginnerally puts some in ter help de flavor. Run down an' ax dem fishermen ter give yo' three or fo' nice big fishes."

Tom called to the major, who tossed three beautiful big white perch to the bank. Tom helped Jeff scale and clean them, taking off heads, tails, and fins, then added the fish to the concoction which was already giving off most hunger-compelling odors.

"Dat ar stew don' need ernother thing now 'ceppin' ter simmer steady about free hours. Den, ef yo' don' say hit's de bes' eatins' yo'

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ever had, I ain' never gwine make nary 'nother. De Brunswick is de fines' stew whut grows. In co'se folks *kin* make hit—or som'p'n' like hit—at home on de cook-stove, but hit's de woods, an' de game, an' de flaver of de smoke, an' de appertite yo' gits whut is de mainest thing."

Tom began to get hungry as soon as he got a whiff of the bubbling richness when Jeff lifted the lid to give it a caressing stir. His mouth watered.

"Uh huh! Yo's gittin' hongry—I knows hit!" exclaimed the cook, triumphantly.

"I sure am!" admitted Tom, hopefully.

"Well, yo' jes' git hongrier yit. An' I ain' gwine give yo' a doggone thing ter eat twell dis yer Brunswick is done right. I ain' gwine ter have yo' appertite ruint, an' den have yo' say my stew ain' de bes' thing yo' ever eat."

"Oh, shucks! Gimme a piece of corn-bread, Uncle Jeff!"

"Not er bit. Yo' better go on 'way f'm hyar, kaze de longer yo' smell dat stew de mo' yo' mouf waters twell yo' is likely ter drown yo'se'f in yer innards dat way."

Tom reluctantly went down to the lake-edge, and, taking a bottle containing some crickets, his fishing-line, and minnow-bucket to keep his catch in, fished awhile from a tremendous old

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cypress log lying in the edge of the water. He managed to land seven very nice bream.

He felt tired from being up so long, and drowsy. There was a most inviting pile of leaves just up the bank, and he laid down to rest awhile. The smell of the forest enchanted and lulled him. A redbird whistled merrily from the trees above. He felt his eyes closing, and then—

Next thing he knew the sun was shining directly in his face, and somebody was shaking him vigorously.

"Hey—you know how long you've been asleep?" asked Major Dean, who was rousing him.

"Nope. Been too busy to wake up and see!"

"You've snoozed from ten o'clock until half past one. Ready for some of that Brunswick?"

"You sure are a good guesser!" answered Tom, awake all at once. It seemed as if he never was so hungry in his life. He went to the spring and bathed his face and hands in the icy water, and felt fine and refreshed from his open-air nap. As he climbed the bank toward camp he saw Joe Weston coming in with six nice squirrels to add to the turkeys they would take back home with them.

Uncle Jeff helped the stew in deep tin pans. There was a tablespoon at each place to eat it

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with, an immense hunk of hoe-cake, and a tin cup of freshly made black coffee. That was all.

Until his dying day neither Tom nor Mr. Ralston will forget the taste of that Brunswick stew. Appetites were at the keenest edge, and added to the delight. Every ingredient had cooked down to a soft, harmonious, and delicate whole, gamy and rich and most satisfying. It was the most thoroughly delightful dish either of them had ever eaten. It was not new to the major and Joe, but they enjoyed it as much as the two guests who were having their first experience.

Tom managed to get away with three pans of it, two big hunks of hoe-cake, and two cups of the coffee.

"This is the only time I ever wished I was a dumb beast," he remarked, wistfully, as he eyed the pot where the stew was yet simmering gently, and plenty of it yet for all hands.

"Why, Tom—what sort of a beast?" asked Joe, with a grin.

"I'd like to be a camel. I hear they have seven stomachs. And just think what a help that would be on an occasion like this!"

After eating the stew the party lounged and talked and dozed for two hours while the negroes cleaned up the camp utensils, packed the things back in the wagons, and dressed the game.

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Then as the sun began to near the tops of the trees in the west the party started homeward. The fun was over for Joe and Tom for a month or so, at any rate, and for Mr. Ralston, who would leave the next week for his business in the North.

CHAPTER XXIII

BREAKFAST at the Ralston home was over, and Joe Weston, Tom, and Mr. Ralston were on the front porch, where Joe was preparing to take his leave.

"Well, we've had a mighty good time, Mr. Ralston, but work-time has come. No more frolicking until the crops are laid by," said Joe.

"What's 'laid by'?" inquired Tom, anxious to obtain information from his tutor.

"Laid aside, done with—worked and tended enough—nothing to do except wait for Nature to mature 'em," answered Joe. "That is in late summer. From then until fall there is not much to do, except haying or pulling fodder."

"Look here, Joe. Anything I can do to help you?" inquired Mr. Ralston. "You've showed me more fun than I ever had before. Can't I make some return?"

"Not a thing, Mr. Ralston, unless you'll sell me that fertilizer down in the cow-lot and stable-yard. There's about fifty wagon-loads of it, I guess, and I need barn-yard stuff mightily."

"What's it worth, Joe?"

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"Scraped up and ready to load I guess it's worth thirty cents a two-horse wagon-load. It could be better, because it's been exposed to the rain and lost lots of strength, but it is better than nothing."

"How are you going to use it?" asked Tom.

"On those four acres I have been using for prize corn and truck. I'll spread it on the oats, then turn it all under."

"Fifty loads isn't much for four acres, Joe," suggested the major, who had come out on the porch and heard the talk.

"It's twelve and a half loads to the acre. That's a heap better than none. I've got about twenty-five loads at home, of a compost of rotten leaves and stable scrapings, full strength and saved under shelter. I'll use that too."

"Tell you what," said Mr. Ralston; "that stable and cow-lot of mine need a good cleaning, anyway. I don't calculate to do any farming much this year—there isn't enough there to do any material good on my place here. I'll just have the lot-boys scrape that stuff in piles, and you can have it if you will haul it off."

"Oh, say, now—that's mighty fine of you, Mr. Ralston!" exclaimed Joe, gratefully. "It will be a big help to me, because I'm needing stuff like that. I'm trying to cut the cost, and

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you've saved me just about fifteen dollars in expense."

"By George, I'll do better than that, then. I'll make the lot-boy haul it over there for you—I want to see you win the prize this year!"

Joe Weston looked doubtful. It was a great temptation, for he had to charge in all his time expended on the acre at eight cents an hour, and the use of a two-horse team and wagon at two dollars a day, those being the rules of the contest. Then his way suddenly appeared clear.

"Much obliged, Mr. Ralston, but I don't believe it would be just exactly right. I mean it would be actually helping me—that wouldn't appear on the record. It would give me a little advantage over the others competing, and I think I ought not to take it."

"I guess you are right, Joe. Fight it out on the square, and in case of doubt let the other fellow take the dubious chance—that will win, anyway," said Mr. Ralston. The major nodded approval.

"I'll do that very thing, sir," responded Joe, quietly.

"Seems to me it would be entirely proper for you to take the stuff from me as a gift if I want to get it off my premises to get my lots clean. What do you think, Major?"

"No objection in the world to that. It is

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just a case of where Joe is more fortunate than others in obtaining it, but he ought to haul it himself, I think."

"That's the way I look at it," said Joe.

"All right; I'll start those two darkies to-day to scraping it up in piles, and you can commence hauling when you are ready," said Mr. Ralston.

"I'll begin to-morrow soon after daylight."

"Oh, here now—that's too early!" objected Tom, who was to make his first actual trial of farm-work when Joe started.

"No, sirree—not when you are paying two dollars a day for a team and fighting every cent of expense. Day begins at daylight and ends at dark. I'll get fifteen loads a day hauled—maybe more."

"Want me to help?" Tom was hopeful that Joe would refuse.

"If you are going into this thing sure enough to learn, you better get a shovel and be on hand when I come over for the first load," answered Joe.

"Tom will be there," interrupted his father, dryly. "He's started this thing about wanting to learn farming; now he's got to keep it up."

"Oh, I'm no quitter!" asserted Tom, getting red. "Had no idea of dodging. I'll be there, and I'll work, too!"

"All right; see you later!" Joe Weston

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mounted the pony brought to the front door for him, and, waving a farewell, loped down the road toward home.

"Howdy, stranger. Light, an' rest your saddle!" called his father, pretending not to know him after his absence.

"Believe I will. Here, ma; here's a half a dozen squirrels and a nice fat little wild-turkey hen, all dressed for you." Joe handed over the bundle. "Those squirrels will make a bully pie—and I guess you know what to do with that wild turkey." The game had been carefully cleaned and kept on ice in the big refrigerator at the Ralstons'.

"Mighty glad to get 'em," said his mother. "Looks to me like you've put on a few pounds lately, Joe."

"Wouldn't be surprised—at the rate I've been eating," chuckled Joe.

"We've been livin' pretty high ourselves since you've been running with those Yankee millionaire folks," said Mr. Weston. "Bear, deer, birds, wild turkey, squirrels—and you gettin' paid for it, too!"

"Well, come to think of it, the scheme is pretty fine; but, then, pa, think of all the hard years we've had—no fun and powerful poor eating," suggested Joe, soberly.

"That's so; and I've about come to the idee

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that the harder a man works the more fun he's goin' to have some time or other, an' the more he appreciates it when it does come."

"Sorter looks that way, don't it?" agreed Joe. "Well, we've got to get busy now. Come on, le's round up the calves and stock. I'm going to turn them in on the oats. To-morrow I want the wagon and team—I start to hauling manure."

"Where from? The stable?"

"No. Mr. Ralston told me I could have about fifty loads over there if I'd haul it off."

"Say now, that's fine, ain't it?"

"Biggest help to me I can think of," said Joe.

"Well, you get on the pony and drive the stock up from th' paster, an' I'll open the gates. My, won't they have a picnic on them tender oats!"

The twenty-three calves Joe and his father had picked up for an average of two dollars and a quarter each were already beginning to show the effects of good treatment and care. They went after the succulent young oats, now something over shoe-top high, voraciously, as did the cows and horses.

"Ain't that a pair of little beauties, though?" inquired Joe, indicating two fawn-colored heifer calves.

"They are that—and more than two-thirds Jersey. They ought to make good milk cows."

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"They're too fine to sell for beef. Le's just keep them and raise them. And that black-and-white spotted one, too," suggested Joe.

"Where'd you get that one? Looks to me like she's got a heap o' Holstein in her," said Mr. Weston.

"Got her from that Walker boy, and she has got Holstein in her. Made me pay three and a half for her on that account."

"Well, she's wuth ten of anybody's money as she stands right now. With two Jerseys and the old cow, and this calf of the old cow's and a Holstein, we ought to be selling considerable butter in about three years—with what other good calves we can pick up," suggested Mr. Weston.

"I think so. And there's another heifer in that bunch that shows signs of Jersey, too. I'm in favor of keeping her."

"Ain't no better breed in the world for furnishin' rich milk to make butter from. After while, when we're able, I'm for getting a herd of thoroughbred Jerseys," asserted Mr. Weston. "We can sell the butter at a good profit, and there isn't a better feed on earth for pigs and chickens than buttermilk."

"Ain't these farmers fools to sell them calves for a little or nothin' like they have done? Now just look at this herd—actually hasn't cost

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us three dollars outlay for feed, except some cotton-seed meal for those scrawny, pore, weak, starved little fellers. They won't cost us anything much next winter; we'll raise enough stuff here to carry 'em through. By this fall a year they'll be wuth twenty-five dollars apiece of any man's money," Mr. Weston mused, as he leaned over the gate and watched the contented cattle.

"We'll make something like five hundred dollars clear on the idea, and get three or four good milch cows, too," added Joe.

"Then think. We've returned the feed an' humus to the soil and been able to make many a ton of manure to build up the land. That is wuth two hundred dollars cash itself, for we won't have to buy as much commercial stuff," suggested the older man.

"Isn't it wonderful, pa, how this business of progressing opens up—one thing from another? And it is all so plain and so sensible and accordin' to reason."

"It sure is!"

"And just to think, we haven't got started good yet, pa! Why, we're in the A, B, C class yet compared with those farmers up North and in the Middle West. They are the best farmers in the world, I reckon."

"I guess they've forgot more things about

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good farmin' than we know," agreed his father, enjoying the sight of the calves as they reaped the young oats.

"Speakin' of A, B, C's, Joe, I'm sorter pestered about your droppin' school like you have. Do you think it's a good idee, son?" Mr. Weston had of late become painfully aware of his own educational limitations.

"No, sir; but it couldn't be helped this year. Besides, I can read well, and do read all the time, and I'm learning things. And to tell the truth, I've got about as far as I can go in this little school here. That is a mighty poor teacher."

"Well, you can't expect much of a teacher at thirty-five dollars a month. She does the best she can, I reckon," said Mr. Weston, charitably.

"Looks to me like the state ought to pay more and get better teachers for the country schools. At any rate, I'm reading my school-books when I have a chance—and reading these bulletins will help me. Education is knowing things useful to you."

"Who told you that, son?"

"The President. He said there wasn't any more sense in packing a lot of useless junk around in your head than in hauling it about in a wagon."

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"B'lieve he's right!"

"I know he's right! I'm trying to educate myself to be a first-class farmer. She wants to make me study chemistry—not agricultural chemistry. She wants to make me study algebra and astronomy. I've got about as much use for them as that calf there has. Take yourself, pa. You see what you've learned from reading good agricultural books. Well, I've been learning, too!"

"If you get that scholarship to that agricultural school it 'll be a big help to you."

"Yes, and along the line I want to learn. I'm going to win it, too—you remember that."

"Competition's goin' to be fierce!" warned his father.

"Yes, but I've another scheme, and it's real easy, too."

"How—for goodness' sake?"

"Well, it's simple. Just in making as much corn as I did last year, maybe a few bushels more, but in holding down the expense in making it."

Mr. Weston looked at him inquiringly.

"You see, I showed 'em how to make a big crop last year. It's easy. Just pile in the fertilizer after the ground has been well prepared, and keep it worked good—and every boy is going to plunge hard on commercial fertilizer

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and nitrate of soda and potash and labor. They are not going to stop to figure the cost."

"I begin to see the point," grinned Mr. Weston.

"Well, this contest is judged as much on the low cost of producing the corn as on the amount. If I equal the best in the amount and beat them on the cost, I win, don't I?"

"That's business, that's business!" enthused his father.

"But you're bound to use some nitrate and stuff?"

"Yes, sir. The land isn't rich enough yet to make a big crop without it, but every pound of barn-yard stuff I put in makes it necessary to use less commercial stuff."

"I'll help every way I can. If you see where I can be of any use, count on me," assured his father.

The talk then drifted to business methods in farming. Joe told Mr. Weston about what Mr. Ralston had said about utilizing the by-products in the factory and the waste steam. Mr. Weston was actually trembling with eagerness and excitement at the discovery.

"By gracious, that's it, that's it!" he exclaimed. "I've laid awake nights when you was a baby, an' before, up to a year ago, wonderin' why it was there never seemed to be no

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money in farmin'. Jest a livin', an' a mighty poor one at that, the way most folks farm. It's because they don't use the by-products and the waste steam—an' the opportunities!"

"The farmers don't make their places produce all the places can produce. A farm isn't anything but a factory, turning elements into food and stuff," said Joe.

"Ain't no contradictin' that at all," said his father. "Say, tell me that about Mr. Ralston an' the waste steam again—I want to get the story right?"

"Mr. Ralston said that when he had a small factory he kept noticing the great clouds of steam from the exhaust-pipe—that is where it is carried after it has passed through the cylinder of the engine and turned loose in the air. Each puff of steam means that steam has pushed the piston-rod of the cylinder one way, backward or forward.

"It looked like an awful waste of coal and wages for the engineer and fireman—"

"Yes, I understand how an engine works; I worked in a sawmill one winter," said Mr. Weston.

"So Mr. Ralston had to have more power in the shop, and he didn't feel able to put in another set of boilers and buy a new engine, so he just transferred that steam after it was used in the

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main engine to a secondary engine and made it work again. It was cooling some then, and he ran the exhaust-pipe into a condensing tank where the steam turned back to water, but it was hot water, and when it was sucked back in the boiler to be turned into steam again it did not take but one-third the coal to raise it back to steam that it took to raise the cold water to steam."

"Well, I do know. Ain't that close figgerin'?" admired Mr. Weston.

"It saved Mr. Ralston fifteen hundred dollars a year for coal, the cost of a new engine and boilers, and the pay of another fireman."

"So, we got to see on the farm how we can take short cuts and get all out of the place possible, like he did with that steam?"

Joe nodded.

"Up at that agricultural college where I want to go they have been studying for years how to use the waste steam—how to make the farms produce the most. Down here we've been living like those calves and thinking just about as much."

"Joe, you've just got to win that scholarship!" urged his father.

"I am going to do my dead level best, and I think I will win," said the lad, slowly.

"Have you figgered on what you are goin' to do with the rest of your patch here?"

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"Well," reflected Joe, "I thought an acre of early snap-beans, an acre of Irish potatoes, and an acre of tomatoes would bring us good money. Then there's this advantage: we can get those crops off in time to drill corn in there and raise a lot of provender for winter. It'll take a heap to carry all this stock."

"That's right. Let the corn get about tasselin', then cut it and dry it, and run it through a chopper as we feed it. It's a fine, fattenin' feed," agreed Mr. Weston.

"We better drive to town right after dinner an' get the seed-potatoes an' order the snap-bean seed, an' get the tomato seed too."

"I think so. It will take about three days for those cattle to cut those oats down close, but there's nothing particular to do after dinner, and it will be a good time to get that trading in town over with."

CHAPTER XXIV

“**M**A, do you know anything about canning stuff?” asked Joe, after full justice had been done to the savory squirrel pie and well-baked turkey hen, both of which Joe had provided.

“Powerful little, son. Why?”

“Well, if you had a chance to learn, would you?”

“Of course, if I had a canning outfit and somethin’ to can.”

“All right; wait a minute.” Joe left the table and returned with a pamphlet out of a bundle of several the mail-carrier had left that morning. “Here it is, one of the government bulletins—gives you the whole thing right here. If you’ll just study this until you get it fixed in your mind I’ll buy you a nice canning outfit.”

“That would be mighty nice, and a big help next winter, to have plenty of canned huckleberries and blackberries and plums and peaches, and things to make pies of. We’d live high!”

“I’m going to plant a lot of tomatoes and snap-beans. Those that ain’t fancy enough to

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sell you and sister Annie can pick and put them up. There'll be plenty of them."

"I'll bet you could make some money on 'em, wife," suggested Mr. Weston. "I know what they pay for canned tomatoes, wholesale."

"How much, pa?" inquired Mrs. Weston.

"They pay the wholesale grocers eighty cents a dozen, and retail at ten cents a can—dollar twenty a dozen."

"What do the cans and all cost, to put 'em up?" persisted Mrs. Weston.

"I don't know, except from the report of the Girls' Tomato Club work. It says there that the cans and labels cost about a cent and three-quarters each, and estimate cost of tomatoes and labor for each can at a cent."

Mrs. Weston did some mental arithmetic.

"Even then there's a fair profit in it. The person who grows the tomatoes and puts 'em up gets the cent. Really, the cost is a cent and three-quarters a can, ain't it?"

Her husband nodded.

"I'll bet you could sell many a dozen to boarding-houses and hotels in town at a dollar a dozen. It would mean an additional profit of twenty cents for you and a saving of twenty cents for them over what they'd have to pay retail," suggested Joe.

"It looks pretty good," announced Mrs.

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Weston. "You get me that canning outfit, and I'll make a try at it."

"All right. If I win that scholarship I won't be here next spring, ma, and you can have my prize corn acre to raise tomatoes on, and it won't cost you a cent for fertilizer. It will be plenty rich. You ought to clean up a pretty nice pile."

"All my life I've wanted some way to make some money of my own," said Mrs. Weston. "Now I see the way, and I'm going to follow it. You men needn't think you are the only money-makers. Just watch Annie and me with my chickens and canning outfit!"

"Tell you another scheme, ma. I'll set aside three nice spring pigs. You and Annie fatten 'em up and turn 'em into that fine smoked sausage next winter. I'll bet you can make a lot on that, too."

"Well, that's a fine plan—never thought of it. And I heard Mis' Allen in town complainin' that she couldn't get pure pork sausage from the butchers any more—they filled it up with beef scraps!" enthused Mrs. Weston. "We'll try that too."

"Isn't a bit of reason in the world why all the canned fruit and vegetables farmers buy out of stores shouldn't be put up on the farms—save a heap of money," reflected Joe,

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"'Stid of that," chuckled Mr. Weston, "I see these here triflin' farmers a-buyin' canned termatters an' corn, an' such, an' haulin' it out where it ought to grow an' be saved."

"I knows where there's a big pile of tomato cans behind the barn!" announced Annie, proudly, trying to get into the drift of the conversation. The whole family exploded into a laugh.

"I'm guilty, sis!" chuckled her father. "Just as guilty as any of the rest of 'em, but I was sort of hopin' nobody would throw it up to me."

"We won't do it any more," assured Mrs. Weston. "You get me that canning outfit, and I'll start practisin' on early vegetables—pease, beets, and such. Then by the time tomatoes are ripe I'll be ready too. Can we afford it, though? Those canning outfits are dreadful expensive, ain't they?" she asked, with some apprehension.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Joe, easily. "The one the Girls' Tomato Clubs use, tested and recommended by the experts of the Agricultural Department, costs about three dollars and fifty cents; and the cans and labels a cent and three-quarters—maybe about a cent and a half if the label is not counted."

"My goodness! I thought a canning outfit

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would cost twenty or twenty-five or fifty dollars, or some such awful price!" she exclaimed, with relief.

"I had no idee they were that cheap myself," said Mr. Weston. "And with 'em as easy to get as that, just to think of the stuff that goes to waste around these farms that could be saved."

"Why, a canning outfit will save the average family like ours over a hundred dollars a winter, easy," calculated Mrs. Weston.

"And that is not counting in how much better folks can live. Just think of huckleberry pies in midwinter, blackberries, strawberries, plenty of corn and tomatoes, beets, pease—why, we will live like princes," mused Joe.

"It looks to me," said Mr. Weston, "like there ain't no excuse whatever for a farmer to live like we did afore Joe got this Corn Club notion in his head."

"No, there ain't any excuse except right down ignorance and stubbornness," assented his wife.

"I reckon if Joe hadn't made that showin' right under my nose we'd 'a' been livin' just like a lot o' slaves as we had been doin'—in debt, ownin' nothin' an' owin' everything," the head of the family continued. "Look at us now—me gettin' to be a pretty fair book farmer, knowin' the whys an' wherefores o' things,

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payin' for land that 'll be ours before this year ends, and in a fair way to be tolerable well off by the time I'm old!"

"Yet, there's a hundred farmers that won't see the chance to one that does," remarked Joe. "I was reading in the paper where down in Limestone County the farmers walked out of a meeting got up for their benefit because they said the experts sent there to lecture and show them 'were nothing but a lot of beardless boys.' The youngest expert was twenty-five years old. These mossbacks actually wouldn't listen to them!"

"The poor old ignorant fools!" exclaimed Mr. Weston. "They've been content to make ten and twenty bushels of corn an acre all their lives—and along comes twelve an' fourteen year-old chaps an' make two hundred an acre, an' better!"

"There's none so blind as them that will not see,'" said Mrs. Weston, solemnly. Her husband began chuckling to himself.

"What are you laughing at?" demanded Joe.

"Just thought o' somethin.' The way these old mossbacks won't believe what you Corn Club boys are doin' right under their noses reminds me of a story I heard on Hen Tucker before the railroad came through this neck o' the woods—a good while ago."

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"What was it?" inquired Mrs. Weston. "Those Tuckers used to be awful ignorant folks—I've hearn pa tell of 'em. Not that we was any great shakes of wise people ourselves, but goodness knows they were sure enough ignoramuses."

"Well," laughingly continued Mr. Weston, "they tell it on Hen that when the railroad first come through this neck o' the woods to Crossville a circus come to town. It was fifteen miles from Hen's, but he went. He never got no further'n the menagerie tent. There, in front of a great big elephant that stood there a-swayin' his trunk from side to side, Hen took his stand. The elephant would reach out every once in a while and grab a peanut or a wisp of hay and stuff it in his mouth.

"Hen's little boy got tired of lookin' at the elephant, and began to pull and tug at Hen to get him to move on. Hen kept his eyes glued on that elephant. Twice he started off, then he come back and took his stand. By that time his little boy was bellerin' like a bull yearlin', so a showman told Hen he'd have to get out with that racket, it made the animals nervous.

"Finally, Hen took one more good long look at the elephant, turned to go, looked back

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ag'in, jammed his hat down over his face, an' started out, a-draggin' his bawlin' youngster.

"'Doggone hit!' says Hen, 'I don't keer what nobody says—there jest hain't no sich er animal like that!'

"And that," observed Mr. Weston, "is just like some of these farmers. Tell 'em they can make a hundred bushels of corn an acre nearly as easy as they make ten, an' they won't listen; show 'em two hundred, an' they won't believe it an' hate you for showin' it to 'em. Just like Hen Tucker—won't believe even their own eyes."

"We'd better be getting on to town," suggested Joe.

"Law, yes! I forgot it. Le's put Link to scrapin' the cow-lot while we are gone. Tomorrow he can help in the loading. Come on."

The orders were delivered to Link, who had become a sincere admirer and imitator of Joe. The colored boy paused a minute in his work.

"Mister Joe, will yo' gimme a few yeahs o' dat cawn?" he asked.

"What for, Link?"

"Well, suh, I been watchin' yo'. Las' yeah I raised a tollerbul little patch o' cawn whut I worked sorter like yo' did. I didn' git de idee through dis yere thick haid er mine soon ernuff, but I sho is gwine plant me a acre o'

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cawn dis spring—an' make somethin' on hit, too."

"Why, yes, Link, I'll give you some corn. Can't spare much. Got your fertilizer on yet?"

"Partly. I been savin' stuff outen our stable an' scrapin' up de droppin's in de cow paster, an' totin' leaves."

"All right, I'll help you all I can. Got anybody to break your land yet? That's one of the main things—get it broke deep."

"Mister Hennerson 'lowed he'd break hit deep an' cross-break an harrer hit fer three dollars, an' I'm savin' up fer hit. Got er dollar an' six bits now."

"It ought to be done soon, Link; that stuff ought to be turned under and rotting," said Joe.

"I knows hit, Mister Joe, but whut is er pusson gwine do wid no money an' no credick?" The negro boy was puzzled.

"Anybody that's tryin' to make somethin' o' themselves is never goin' to suffer for help—just you remember that, Link. I'll break that acre for you—do it in the next week—an' let you pay me in corn when you gather your crop," said Mr. Weston.

"Gee, dat's mighty good o' yo'!"

"You pay me three dollars' worth of corn at forty cents a bushel; that 'll fatten a hog for me," said Mr. Weston.

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"Dat sho is er trade!" agreed Link.

"I'll give you enough seed-corn to plant the acre, Link," said Joe, kindly.

"'Bleeged ter yo', 'bleeged ter yo', boss!"

"What do you want to go to growin' corn for, Link?" inquired Mr. Weston, with curiosity. Link grinned.

"Well, suh, I seed how po' yo' folkses wuz, an' dat yo' is gettin' on in de worl' powerful well now since yo' got ter farmin' reel skyen-tifick." He seemed immensely proud of the word. "I seed whut er pusson kin do wid dis yere groun' an' make hit do when yo' knows how an' ain' skeered ter use elbow-grease. An' I 'lows ter merse'f: 'Link, is yo' gwine grow up er triflin' nigger an' no 'count, or is yo' gwine own er fawm an' be som'p'n'?"

"That's right, Link," encouraged Mr. Weston. "That's the way to look at it."

"So I's gwine raise all de cawn I kin on dat acre. Daddy done promise I kin have whut I makes, same es yo' did, Mister Joe. I'll sell de cawn dis fall, buy me some clo'es an' school-books, an' go ter school er while. Odd times I'll be wuckin' on dat acre gettin' hit rich, an' nex' year I'll raise er sho 'nuff crap. Den atter while I'll have some book-l'arnin' an' money ernuff ter go ter Booker Washin't'n's school an' learn all about farmin'."

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"You and I are working for just about the same thing, Link," said Joe. "It's bound to win, and, moreover, you can just count on me to help you as much as I can. Now get busy on that lot scraping it. We've got to go to town."

Mr. Weston and Joe spent no unnecessary time in town. As they drove down the main street with the new wagon and a well-fed team Mr. Weston waved at one or two of his old cronies hanging about the door of a pool-room suspected of being a "blind tiger," where liquor was sold unlawfully. The men hardly returned his greeting. One of the fellows wiped his suspiciously red nose and glared at the wagon speeding down the thoroughfare.

"Now, don't he think he's some punkins!" snarled the red-nosed one. "Bet he bought all that stuff on a credick!"

"Oh, yeah. Weston thinks him an' that there smart Aleck brat er his'n knows hit all. Ain't got no time ter be soshyble with folks at all," said another.

"You dern fellers can knock on Weston an' his boy all you want, but he'll have that place paid for this fall, an' his check's good at the bank. I know; I sold him a couple of calves," said another farmer, who had contented himself with buying a plug of tobacco. "An' that," he

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observed, as he bit off a corner of his plug, "is a doggone sight more than ary one of us can say."

"Looks like he thinks he's better'n us," argued the red-nosed one, "since he's gettin' along in the world."

"Tain't that," responded Weston's defender. "He just ain't got time to fool away. He's headed somewhere *definite*. It would be a good thing if *we* was too—an' by jingo, *I* will be soon. If that low-down, triffin, no-'count, lazy, whinin' Weston can pull himself up to where he is an' where he's headin', I reckon I can do some considerable better myself. I'm goin' over an' see what his methods are. An' what's more, I made my boy join the Corn Club this year."

"They say that kid of his'n did make some tremenjus crop o' corn," observed the third man.

"He did, for a fact. I seen hit growin', an' I seen hit when hit was bein' gathered. Beat anything I ever seen in this world."

"When you goin' over to see him, Bill?" asked the red-nosed one, beginning to capitulate.

"Thought I'd ride over thataway Sunday."

"I'll jest come too. Reckon he'd mind tellin' us how he does it?"

"Sure he won't, an' you're dead wrong when

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you think he's stuck up. The man's just busy now, tryin' to make up for lost time."

"All three of us will go," said the third man. "Danged if I ain't tired of havin' nothin'; an' if Weston has found the way to make money farmin' I want to know it. I'll meet you at the schoolhouse at two o'clock."

Mr. Weston and Joe did not linger in town. The seed-potatoes were loaded, a bushel of Valentine bush-beans were ordered, tomato seed purchased, and two hundred pounds of kainite bought to plow under on the corn acre with all the barn-yard stuff, the idea being to furnish plenty of material to mature the ears, as well as the nitrogen and potash in the manure, which went mainly toward growth of leaf and stalk.

They stopped by the sawmill and bought enough pieces of lumber two by four inches square, and three feet longer than the wagon-bed. Arriving home, the pieces were shaved off round for a foot at each end to form a handle, then placed on the wagon instead of the bed. Two planks twelve inches broad were placed on edge at the sides: two pieces of the same width cut to fit crosswise in grooves made by nailing inch-square slats on each side-board, and behold, a collapsible wagon-bed was complete!

"Now," said Mr. Weston, surveying the job

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with satisfaction, "I figger that'll save a world o' time. 'Stid of havin' to shovel each load out, shovelful at a time, all you got to do is pull out them end pieces, lift each of these here two-by-fours separately, and the stuff falls to the ground. Make the team pull up a bit as you move each timber, an' you've got it pretty well spread in a few minutes. It would take fifteen minutes to unload that wagon with a shovel. You do it in two minutes this way."

Everybody went to bed early, and at the first graying of the sky next morning Joe was up and dressed. He fed the team, then came in, and his mother soon had a quick breakfast for him. When he finished, the horses had got through with their ration. His father helped him hitch up and opened the gate for him and waved him good-by as the team trotted smartly down the road to the Ralston plantation.

Tom was on hand, dressed in a new suit of overalls, and strove valiantly with a shovel to assist in the loading. It came very awkwardly to him, though. The two lot-boys helped load, and in five minutes' time Joe started back with a whopping big load of the precious fertilizer. Tom placed the seat and climbed up.

"Get off!" commanded Joe. "I'm going to walk myself as long as I can. I weigh a hundred and twenty-nine—you about the same. Two

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hundred and fifty or sixty pounds on ten loads is equal to the weight of more than another load or a load and a half," he explained, as they trudged beside the team. "These roads are none too good, and I've got to make the strength of these horses go as far as I can."

"You'll lose time walking," argued Tom.

"Maybe later in the day I'll ride, but I won't as long as I'm fresh. The more stuff I can haul each load the quicker I can get the stuff on the land and charge off this two dollars a day for the team and eight cents an hour for myself. I'm fighting expenses."

CHAPTER XXV

THE work of hauling and dumping went forward steadily, and when night came seventeen loads had been hauled and placed on the acre.

Joe figured that he saved at least two days' time by the loose-bottom method of dumping the loads. The work of hauling was completed on the third day—forty-six loads in all—and every bit went on the corn acre. Then the young oats and the fertilizer were turned under. The ground was already mellow and full of vegetable matter.

"In one more year this will be the best piece of land in the whole county," remarked Joe. "It will make a hundred bushels of corn and maybe more next year, without another pound of barn-yard fertilizer or an ounce of commercial stuff."

Link and Mrs. Weston and Annie had busied themselves cutting up the Irish potatoes for the seed to plant, being careful to leave at least two "eyes," from which the sprouts would come, on each piece of potato. It was a tremen-

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dous job. Joe occupied the next day sweeping up leaves in the grove, packing them across the road in sacks to spread in the rows. After the potato-cutting was under way and the end in sight, Link was called into the game and helped with the leaves.

The next day Mr. Weston plowed the acre for the potatoes, turning it under deeply, cross-breaking and harrowing. The year's work on the land in turning under stuff had helped it wonderfully.

The rows were then laid off with the bull-tongue plow, and Link and Joe commenced dropping the potatoes in, after first scattering a liberal quantity of vegetable-grower commercial fertilizer in the bottom of the rows. Then the sacks of leaves were taken and the seed-potato pieces covered three or four inches deep. One of the horses was hitched to a drag made of a square piece of timber eight feet long, and which was hitched by a single tree to the horse. Joe stood on the timber and drove the horse at right angles to the rows. It covered the potatoes perfectly and packed the dirt on them, and at the same time smoothed the surface of the field.

Link looked on, and finally scratched his head reflectively as he remarked:

"Dat looks ter me like er funny way ter

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plant 'taters. I allers seen 'em planted in hills."

"Most folks do that for two reasons—one to keep the water from standing on the seed and rotting them, and the other is to have plenty of loose dirt to keep the seed moist and for the young potatoes to develop in."

"Well, whut's de reason o' dis?"

"Ever notice an Irish-potato plant with a root and young potatoes on it?"

"Nossuh."

"Well, I pulled one up and studied it. The young potatoes are formed above the roots which grow from the bottom of the main stem. I put those leaves in there above the part that will be the root to give a loose place for the young potatoes to develop. And it will make the potatoes cleaner and larger."

"Uh huh, I sorter sees."

"And if I had planted in high hills I would have had to cultivate with hoes, wouldn't I? There's no plow that would do any good, is there, on hills 'most a foot high?"

Link shook his head.

"So, this way, for the first two workings I'll use a horse and cultivator and get it done in short order. The last working, when the potatoes are forming, I'll run a plow through and throw the dirt on either side right against the

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potato plants. That will make a hill, and give plenty of room for the young potatoes to grow in, won't it?"

"Yeah—an' hit won't be baked by de sun an' hard; hit'll be loose at de very time when it's needed loose!" exclaimed the darky.

"That's what I thought. I never heard of anybody else planting potatoes this way, but it looks like reason and common sense to me. Don't you think so? There's no reason to put hills here at first, because the land is well drained and deep plowed. Water won't stand on it."

"Seems sensibul to me," agreed Link. "Mister Joe, what made yo' think o' dat way to plant pertaters?"

"Wanted to do the work at less cost and make a profit."

"Mister Joe, just persizely whut is er 'profit'? I ain' never got dat right in mer min' yit. I knows 'bout Bible prophets, but what's dis kin' yo' is allers talkin' erbout?"

"The less it costs you to make a crop of corn or potatoes, the more you make when you sell, because you don't have to deduct from the price you get the increased cost of making the crop. It's the difference between what it costs you to make a crop and what your stuff brings."

"But dis yere 'tater crop ain't costin' yo'

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nothin' 'cept de seed, two dollars' wuth o' fertilizer, an' de time wuckin' hit?"

"That's it—time can be turned into money. The less time it takes to make these potatoes, the more time I will have to put on something else to make money on. See?"

"I does," said Link, proudly. "I want's ter learn dese things, kaze I's gwine be er farmer like yo' is gwine ter be, sho as yo' bawn."

That night Joe got down the nicely bound blank-book he had purchased for a quarter in town and prepared to open his account of operations for the year. The rules of the Corn Club contest required that every move he made, with dates and items of expense, be noted as made.

Before going to work on his book he told about how Link had finally gotten the idea that time was money. Mr. Weston laughed.

"That reminds me of another story they tell on Hen Tucker. He was in town one day, and a feller was on the street sellin' a new kind of incubator. Hen stood right in front of the crowd, mouth open, takin' it all in. The man explained that the incubator would do the work, and the settin' hens could be put back to work layin'.

"'Ain't it a wonder, friend? Don't you think it's fine—ain't it a time-saver?' preached the

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agent. Tucker thought it was up to him to say something, so he kind o' gasped, his mouth workin' like that of a perch out o' water.

"'Aw, shucks,' sezze, tryin' to show the crowd how smart he was. 'What's the use o' that contraption? What's *time* to a settin' hen, anyhow?' I thought that crowd would bust their sides laughin'. Everybody used to call 'im Henry before that, but they got to callin' him 'Settin' Hen', an' then it got down to 'Hen,' an' that's been his name ever since."

After the laugh had subsided Joe made the first entry in his book.

"February 20, 21, 22: Hauled forty-six loads barn-yard fertilizer and dumped on acre. Twenty-two of said loads cow-lot scrapings; balance, horse-lot. Badly leached by exposure to weather. No cost for said fertilizer.

"Same date: Hire of team and wagon to haul, \$2.00 a day; two full days and part of third day, \$4.40; wages of self at 8 cents per hour, \$2.20. Total, \$6.60."

"Whew!" Joe commented. "That is 'mounting up fast!"

"Well, but it's cuttin' down on commercial fertilizer an' buildin' up the land permanent."

"Yes, but I can't charge off any of that permanent benefit to next year and the year after. This crop has got to bear the whole burden."

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"Does look like some of it ought to go on next year. Big job to figger out all these things."

"I guess we'd better slap that stuff we've got saved on that acre and bed it up now. It's pretty strong, and it might go to burning the crop in hot weather if we don't let it lie in the ground before planting on it."

"Great goodness, there's that team again! Two dollars a day!" groaned Joe. "And my wages, too!"

"Well, I'll help load, an' make Link help unload."

"Nope." Joe shook his head. "Got to figure you at a dollar a day and Link at the rate of two-fifty a week."

"All right, then; if you got me hired by the day I'll work my level best. Between the three of us and the short haul we ought to get that stuff on there in a day."

"Sure ought," said Joe, with hope.

"An', long's you got me hired by the day, if we got any time left I'll just take the team and bed that acre up for you then?"

"Hope you'll have time to."

"I'll see you get about the biggest day's work I ever have done, boy!" said his father, reassuringly.

"Link 'll sure hustle too when he knows that

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it will help me," added Joe. He was comforted with the reflection.

"Aw, cheer up! Don't be so glum. If you get about twenty-five loads of first-class, high-power fertilizer on there, an' get that acre bedded up ready to plant, for less than five dollars you ought to be proud of it."

"Well, I've got to win largely with this stuff. I'm not going to be able to spend much for nitrate and such."

"Say, what was the lowest cost that corn was made in the contest last year—I mean up in the class better than a hundred bushels to the acre?" inquired Mr. Weston.

"Twenty-three cents a bushel."

"That's awful high!"

"Entirely too high," said Joe, decisively. "That's the reason low cost of production is given a better rating in making up the points this year. And it has directed attention to it."

"Well, if you make two hundred bushels and cut it to twenty cents you've got forty dollars to spend."

"Got to beat twenty cents, pa—that's too high yet. If it was only next year I could make it for less than five cents a bushel, with all this good, permanent stuff I'm putting in here."

"It don't look so bad to me, Joe. You've spent \$6.60 already. Me an' the team to-

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morrow is \$3.00; that totals \$9.60. You, at 8 cents for 12 hours, is 96 cents; and Link, at the rate of 41 cents a day, is \$10.97. But your land is ready to plant!"

"There's \$2.25 for that kainite—\$13.22 total."

"Thus far, then, on a two-hundred-bushel estimate, I've spent just a little over five cents a bushel," said Joe, beginning to revive.

"Sure, an' the rest o' the work 'll be cheap—your own labor at eight cents an hour. Suppose you need the horse an' plow two full days at a dollar a day; you ought to be able to go over that acre with a little light plow in half a day."

"Easy!" said Joe, confidently.

"Well, there's two workin's, a dollar; an' two goin's over with a cultivator, another dollar. Then the rest is just a rake or hoe after rains to keep the top soil loose. You'll have to do that by hand; the corn 'll be so high an' thick you can't use the horse."

"That's \$15.22, not counting my labor. Say, four full days of ten hours at eight cents an hour—that brings the total up to \$18.42 to put the corn in tassel and lay it by. It's doing pretty well."

"You bet it is," assured Mr. Weston, heartily.

"Now, about the chemical stuff," began Joe.

"Well, you know we've been savin' all the wood ashes since last fall an' mixin' 'em in the

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fertilizer pile as we went along. An' there's that barrel o' slack lime that feller rolled off his wagon when the thunder-storm hit it an' the water made it start to heavin' an' poppin' the barrel," Mr. Weston chuckled, with delight.

"Seems to me the ground is pretty well balanced, then, with lime and potash to make the grain, countin' the kainite," said Joe.

"Yes, but we can't take any chances now. Have to use some other stuff."

"Yes, I'll want about three hundred pounds of good complete fertilizer. That'll cost me \$3.75."

"That brings it up to \$22.17. You're past the ten-cent mark, now."

"And I want two hundred pounds of nitrate of soda. Got to have that to push it along. That will cost me \$4.25 more."

"All right; that's a total of \$26.42."

"Anything else you can think of, son?"

"I guess we better be on the safe side and figure two more days' labor at eighty cents—a dollar-sixty."

"At the outside estimate, then, and allowing for everything that can happen, \$28.02 is the most this crop will cost you. On a two-hundred-bushel basis that's fourteen cents a bushel!"

"I'll beat two hundred; I can make two hundred and thirty, I know."

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"Looks to me like you've got 'em skinned to death!" exulted Mr. Weston.

"'Beat to a frazzle!' as the President used to say. There can't any of them make two hundred bushels that cheap."

"An', son, every bushel you make above two hundred pulls down the average cost—don't forget that."

"Gee, if it was only next year I could make that corn for less'n four cents a bushel!" again mourned Joe.

"Well, it ain't next year, an' I reckon this is the very best you can do," said Mr. Weston. "Shows, though, how it pays to build up the soil permanent. Sort o' like puttin' money in the bank—keeps bringin' interest."

"I don't see how the cost can be cut another cent," mused Joe, still intent on the problem of making the corn at the lowest possible figure.

"Me, either, but I believe that schedule 'll win out for you," urged his father.

"I want to get all that stable stuff turned under day after to-morrow, let it stay until about this time next month, the oats and manure rotting. I'll plant about March twenty-fifth."

"That's purty late," advised Mr. Weston. "We generally plant earlier'n that."

"Yes, and we've had some hard frosts here in early April. A frost is mighty bad for corn,

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I'm not taking any chances of having my crop stunted and blighted with cold. I ain't after raising early roasting ears."

"Reckon it is best to plant late; then it 'll go along without any hitch at all," agreed his father.

"Meanwhile, I'll be getting this truck patch planted and in shape to make something with it. We'll break that up soon's we get through with the corn acre. I'll have to get a sack of good vegetable mixture of commercial fertilizer to put under the beans. That land won't make much without it."

The next day was one of intense activity for Joe, his father, and Link. Wagon-load after wagon-load of the barn-yard fertilizer was hauled and scattered over the precious acre. By four o'clock the last load had been put on, and Mr. Weston had the team hitched to a harrow and was spreading the stuff uniformly over the surface. This was the work of an hour and a half, and by that time it was near dark. Team and human beings were utterly fagged out, and turned in for rest.

"By jingo, I don't know when I ever did such a day's work. I'm about used up!" commented Mr. Weston, as he settled before the fire waiting for supper to be got ready. He promptly fell asleep.

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Joe sat and pondered the situation. Already he had beaten his estimate of the cost of preparing the acre. A half a day's work by his father and the team on the morrow would finish the turning under, the cross-breaking, and the harrowing. There was nothing further to do except run the furrows, sprinkle some commercial fertilizer in them, and drop and cover the corn.

Tom Ralston had wandered over that afternoon, but he didn't work. His previous experience helping load the fertilizer had put five tremendous blisters in one hand and four in the other. He could hardly straighten up; there seemed a kink in his back. His arms ached, his legs ached.

"Like farming?" called Joe, with a grin, as he spied Tom gingerly approaching. Joe knew just how he felt. Tom was game, though.

"Yes, but I'll like it better when it quits hurting so," Tom answered.

"I told you not to go at it so hard at first," admonished Joe.

"I'll take your advice next time. I can't do anything until some of the soreness goes away; I'm not used to work."

"About the first real work you ever did, ain't it?" inquired Mr. Ralston.

"The very first," admitted Tom.

"Stick ter hit, Mister Tawm—hit 'll make er

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man of yo'. Dat's de way I got my start!" suggested Link, with a grin. The lot of them laughed.

"I've got a terrible appetite left, though," confessed Tom. "It hasn't been bent or hurt in any way by the work."

"Never was anything wrong with it on the camping trips," dryly suggested Joe. "Didn't need any cultivating at all."

"No, but I mean my regular appetite—not my camp one."

"Oh, you'll feel fine soon's you get over that soreness," said Mr. Weston.

"I'll come over to-morrow—when I can get about without each step hurting," said Tom, preparing to go.

"Go home and take a hot bath and get your mother to give you a real brisk rub-down with olive-oil and alcohol, equal parts. Get a good night's sleep, and most of the soreness will be gone by to-morrow."

"Thanks. I'll try it!" he called, as he passed through the gate.

"That's a fine, plucky chap," observed Mr. Weston.

"He wouldn't listen to me. Now he's all stove up. Maybe he'll think I know a bit next time I talk to him."

"I'll just bet he does!" chuckled Mr. Weston.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE days passed with incredible swiftness for Joe Weston. Because each moment was fully occupied he hardly had time to think of how fast the summer was slipping by.

He planted the corn from the selected ears, which came from stalks bearing more than two ears each of the previous crop, and got a splendid stand from the start. He planted five grains in a hill, in order to insure the stand, thinking that it was better to do this than to run the risk of having to replant, and then have stalks in the crop which would not mature along at the same time with the rest of it.

When the young corn was about a foot high he pulled out the two weakest stalks. Then, two weeks later, he pulled out the third weakest. Consequently, in each hill he had two sturdy, fine plants, the best of the lot of five. The color of the leaves was good, and the way it grew and made stalk was a wonder.

The beans and potatoes were coming along nicely. Early shipments of snap-beans brought a good price. When the market began to fall,

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owing to the deluge of stuff planted by less enterprising growers, Joe concluded the margin of profit was hardly large enough to justify further time devoted to shipping truck. He had managed to clear ninety dollars on the beans. The final crop on the vines was pulled, Mrs. Weston canned a hundred and fifty cans of them, and the vines were plowed under. Corn was planted on the ground the beans had occupied.

"We got to make all the corn we can, Joe. There's a power of stock here to carry through the winter," suggested Mr. Weston.

"I should say so; thirty-eight hogs can eat a heap of corn by themselves, to say nothing of two horses and the other stock to have it fed them as part of the ration," agreed Joe.

He and his father had pursued the same policy about hogs as they had about calves, scouring the neighborhood for sows with broods of young pigs which the improvident farmers were willing to part with cheap for ready cash.

The Irish potatoes by this time were ready for market as early "new" potatoes. Forty bushels were dug by hand. In this way the largest could be selected. Whenever a hill showed cracks about the base of a potato plant it was a sign there were large potatoes in it. With a hand-rake the hill was carefully dug

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into, the biggest potatoes taken out, and the dirt thrown back on the smaller ones, ranging in size from a pea to a walnut, leaving them to mature later. The forty bushels were sold at a dollar a bushel.

Corn was then planted between the potato rows. By the time the corn-stalks would be large enough to interfere seriously with the amount of sunlight the potatoes were receiving the latter would be matured and then plowed up to be dried and stored for winter use or sale. The smaller ones would be sorted and stored for seed for next spring, or perhaps a fall crop of potatoes, which in favorable seasons could frequently be grown with much success.

The tomatoes also had got a fine start, and were hurried along with liberal doses of fertilizer. Mrs. Weston and Annie took the job of cutting off the suckers, which detracted from the strength of the plants, and tying the bearing limbs to the stakes. Then, when gathering-time came, she and Annie had become expert in detecting the peculiar whitish color of the fruit which meant that in the next twenty-four hours it would begin to turn faintly pink. That time would be used in shipping to the distant markets, and then as the tomatoes were opened for sale they would be just right for eating.

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Link assisted in gathering and packing; Mrs. Weston had charge of the grading. A hundred and seventy crates brought in seventy dollars. The market on tomatoes began to fall about that time, and there was not enough margin to justify further shipments.

"Well, ma, the rest of them out there are yours now. There's a right good chance of them yet. Better rig up your canning outfit here in the yard under this tree—it will be cooler than in the kitchen," suggested Joe.

Mrs. Weston had prepared a thousand cans and labels, and had everything in readiness. She waited a few days for the tomatoes to ripen on the vines. She also had two hundred tomato plants of her own in the garden, and had them to supplement the acre crop, the best of which had been shipped. She and Annie got busy picking tomatoes as they ripened, carrying them to the back porch and the table under the tree. There they were selected carefully, the large, fine, full-ripe ones placed by themselves and the smaller ones in another pile.

"What's the idee?" asked Mr. Weston, indicating the two piles, as he came up for dinner. "My, but these are beauties!" He took a great big full-ripe one and ate it with relish.

"Idea's simply that I'm going to put up the very best big, dead-ripe, vine-ripened toma-

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toes in the cans I'm going to sell. I am going to make a reputation for having tomatoes a leetle better'n them that come out of the stores. I'm going to pack the cans chuck full of tomatoes, not water. Them smaller ones I'm goin' to put up for home use," said Mrs. Weston.

"That's right; folks won't expect the home-canned stuff to measure up to the factory-canned," agreed her husband.

"And when they find 'em away ahead, more tomatoes, better flavored, vine-ripened, no cores or specks in 'em, or skins, I'll get a repeat order and contract my whole output next year in advance. I'm goin' to build a reputation on my tomatoes."

"That's business," said Mr. Weston.

"Well, this is mine and Annie's business—this and the chickens and butter and milk next year. And we'll make it pay, too; you just watch."

"I know you will!" encouraged Mr. Weston. "I'm just so glad to see you have a chance. You take what you make and use it like you want, wife."

"No, we're like that book Joe was reading aloud—"

"*The Three Mosquitoes!*" announced Annie, proud of her learning.

"*Three Musketeers*—not mosquitoes," cor-

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rected Mr. Weston, trying to keep his face straight.

"Remember their motto, 'One for all, and all for one'? That's us, until we get this place paid for and get ahead." Mrs. Weston spoke earnestly.

"We're coming fine, too. Le's see: tomatoes, seventy dollars; potatoes, forty dollars; and beans, ninety dollars; and about fifteen dollars or twenty dollars off for labor. Well, say we've cleaned up one hundred and seventy-five dollars off the truck, and got a fine corn crop coming, too. That's Joe's contribution. It 'll more than pay for every one o' them yearlin's we bought an' the pigs too, an' go a long ways torrards feedin' 'em this winter," Mr. Weston calculated, with satisfaction.

"We are getting along fine—ought to pay out in another year," commented Mrs. Weston.

"We will; soon's I get them beeves on the market we'll be in good shape. Ought to be able to sell three hundred dollars' worth o' hogs this fall, too."

"What you reckon the hogs you're going to sell will cost you?" inquired Mrs. Weston.

"Oh, I guess—takin' in what I paid for 'em an' the value o' the corn I'll fatten 'em on—say, sixty-five dollars."

"My, that's a good profit!" said Mrs. Weston.

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"More money in turnin' corn into pork than any way I know of sellin' it," said Mr. Weston.

That afternoon Mr. Weston went away with the wagon and returned late with a complaining old sow and seven small pigs in the wagon-bed.

"My land, pa, where'd you get 'em?" asked Joe.

"Got that old sow an' pigs from a triflin' fellow like I used to be. He sold the lot for five dollars, an' I gave him a check. That old sow's wuth the five dollars. She's a good mother, an' ain't but three years old, either. We'll keep her as a brood-sow. Two-thirds Poland China."

"Great Scott, we've got to make a lot of corn to carry all this stock through the winter! Well, I guess I better put that tomato acre in corn, too!" said Joe.

The next day he ran a furrow between each of the tomato rows each way and planted a dry-weather corn in the corner checks. It was getting late for corn-planting. In the corn crop on the bean acre he sowed cow-pease, to furnish hay from the vines, and the roots to gather nitrogen. The pease also were valuable, but no great amount of them would ripen before the corn would be matured and gathered. But each corn-stalk with its fodder and the pea-vines on it, when run through the shredder and

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the mass stored away in the loft of the barn, would go far toward settling the question of winter provender.

A turning-plow was run under each of the Irish-potato rows. Sixty-eight bushels of very fair potatoes were gathered, and two barrels of small ones ranging from the size of a small marble to a walnut were saved for seed. The potatoes were placed under a shed to dry out before being banked in dry sand and to keep until needed or for sale in winter, when the price advanced, or for home use.

Where the potatoes were taken out, cow-pease were sowed thickly and raked in. The great value of these legumes as soil renovators was thoroughly appreciated by Joe Weston. Besides, the hay from the dried vines was a splendid, well-balanced ration, and the pease that dropped to the ground would be eagerly eaten by the pigs when they were turned in for a few days foraging for overlooked potatoes and such other stuff as they might be able to root up in the way of worms and bugs as well as the sweet stubble of corn.

The tomato vines had ceased to bear. The stakes were pulled up and piled in a corner neatly for use next year. The vines themselves were uprooted and piled in another corner to rot, to be turned under as a bit of help to the

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programme of adding decaying vegetable matter, or humus, to the land.

In all these activities Joe had valuable help from Tom Ralston. Tom was deeply interested in the farming work; he asked questions innumerable about everything, and was anxious to learn. He was growing brown and strong and hearty, a great change from the spindling, delicate city boy he was when he first accosted Joe Weston in the road. He was ready and willing to do his share of the work, and always endeavored to understand the "why" of everything.

He and Joe were idly looking at the prize corn acre one afternoon. So were several farmers who had come in from the road, attracted by the truly inspiring sight the almost solid square of green vegetation presented.

"What are those suckers for, Joe?" asked Tom, pointing to the numerous ones springing out from the roots of the prize corn.

"Well," smiled Joe, "that hasn't been settled yet. Nobody knows, exactly. I had quite an argument with the President of the United States on that subject, when I went to Washington, and came out ahead on it."

"The dickens you did!" inquired a young countryman who was one of the observers. "You didn't have the nerve to argify with the President?"



THE FARMERS WERE ATTRACTED BY THE INSPIRING SIGHT OF JOE'S FINE ACRE

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"Well, he started it," observed Joe, in a matter-of-fact tone. "I had to tell him the truth as I saw it. I was respectful, of course, but all the same I was right, and proved it."

"Well, what about the suckers?" insisted Tom Ralston.

"The argument the President and I had was whether it pays to pull 'em off. I proved that it didn't matter."

"I allers thought they took the strength out o' the main stalk," said the young fellow.

"I don't believe it. I think it is either one of two things that makes corn sucker: it is either trying to change its form from the one stalk and 'stool' several stalks from one root—"

"That sounds sorter reasonable," suggested one of the farmers, who was listening.

"Or else it is a precaution the stalk—the main stalk—is taking in storing up an excess amount of moisture or food in those suckers. Then in an excessive dry spell the sap and moisture stored in the sucker will be drained by the main stalk."

"That sounds more reasonable than t'other," said the eldest countryman. "An' to think, I been raisin' corn thirty-five years an' never thought o' nothin' like that."

"But why should the stalks try to 'stool' to put up other stalks from the roots?" persisted

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Tom. "I want to get to the very bottom of this."

"There are some sure-enough scientists that haven't been able to do that yet, Tom," answered Joe. "I don't know why it is, but I have an idea—and it's only my idea."

"What is it, Joe?" asked another countryman, who had hitherto remained silent. "I've wondered about that myself."

"Have you ever noticed where the suckers are the most numerous?" inquired Joe.

All of them shook their heads in negation.

"Well, I have. They come mostly on stalks that are on rich ground, and the richer the ground, the ranker the growth and the more suckers, it seems to me. That looks like the root system is stronger than the main plant needs, and it is the economy of nature trying to make use of the excess of food."

"By George, b'lieve you're right!" said the young countryman.

"Come to think of it, I've seen some of them suckers try to form little nubbins on the end," added the second man.

"I've seen that, too. Now, whether that is the reason or whether the main stalk is using these suckers as reservoirs for hard times, extra dry weather, or anything of that sort, I can't say. But if they could be made into stalks that

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will bear ears, it would be a big help, wouldn't it, even if the ears were only nubbins?"

"You betcher life!" enthusiastically assented the younger of the three countrymen.

"That's one of the problems they are working on at the agricultural schools, where I want to go if I win out on this contest," said Joe. "They are solving these questions that don't seem so very important to us—little things like this; but those experts go right to the bottom of them and then work them out and turn them to some account."

"I wish ter goodness I could 'a' gone ter one o' them schools an' learnt somethin'," said the younger of the countrymen who had been listening, but had his eyes fixed on the prize acre. "I ain't never thought much of it until this Boys' Corn Club business come along. When boys from ten to fourteen years old can make from one to two hundred bushels an acre, an' us other fellers wabble along with twenty, it's time for the rest of us to wake up."

"It's concentratin'," observed the second countryman.

"Sure!" said the third ruralite. "Look at Joe's fine acre here. He'll make two hundred bushels on it. We've been foolin' aroun' makin', say, twenty, an' on extry good land thirty, bushels an acre, an' thinkin' we've been doin'

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tolerable well. It ain't never the trouble to work one acre thorough as it is to scratch over ten acres like we been doin'."

"Danged if I ain't goin' to try it. Next time there's a Farmers' Institute around I'm goin'. Hear me, folks? And I'm gettin' a patch of five acres ready right now to raise a hundred bushels an acre on next year. I've got a manure-pile higher'n my head now. By fall when I plow it under an' plant oats on top of it that pile 'll give them five acres a powerful help of a start."

"Talkin' about improvements, what would you fellows think of plowing without a horse or a mule?" inquired Joe.

"One of these here tractor-engines an' gang-plows?" said the young countryman, who had been picking up information.

"No, those are for big farmers on level land," answered Joe. "I mean just to take out your plow, touch a match to it, and go to plowing?"

"It can't be did," said the older man, with an air of finality. "That's all foolishness. That day 'll never come."

"You're wrong again; it has already come," said Joe. "There is now a plow on the principle of the motor-cycle—"

"What's that about a motor-cycle?" inquired

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Mr. Weston, who had just come up and joined in the conversation.

"That's a fact. I saw the account of it myself," said Tom. "Father subscribed for a fine agricultural paper for me, and it told all about it. Has an eight-horse-power engine attached to it, and all the man has to do is to guide it and stand between the handles. It does the plowing. It is kind of clumsy yet, but it won't be five years until everybody has 'em."

"Well, I do know!" wondered the oldest man.

"Ump!" remarked Link, who had joined the group. "Dem Yankeys is sure great folks; come down hyar fust en freed de nigger, now dey done come en freed de mewl!" A roar of laughter greeted him.

"Really, it means a heap," said Joe. "Just think how a farmer has to work to produce feed for his power on the farm. Just think how much corn and stuff these old hay-burners—mules and horses—use! If the farmer did not have to feed horses and mules he could throw all that corn and oats and energy into hogs or beef cattle. It will just increase the earning capacity of the farmer about a third."

"What you goin' to do about goin' to town an' haulin'?" queried the old farmer, in triumph. He still loved the mule.

"Automobiles!" responded Joe. "Prices of

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autos are bound to go lower; they are getting in reach of poorer folks. Just hitch the wagon-tongue on behind and use the auto to pull the load."

"Can't do nothin' much with an auto on these roads," suggested the younger man. "Do very well in summer, but winter—oh, my!"

"That's another thing; farmers with autos and good farm machinery will wake up and have good roads," said Mr. Weston. "Then folks can get around and visit more. If all you had to do was to get in your auto and take the folks out ridin' you'd be a heap more sociable, and country'd be a better place to live in."

"How we goin' to get the good roads?" asked the young countryman.

"It's pretty easy," said Mr. Weston. "You notice the road in front of this place?"

"Best road for ten miles," said one of the visitors.

"Well, a log a foot in diameter, split in half and braced so as to make a drag and hauled over that stretch of road about every two weeks rounds the dirt to the center so it sheds water. The travel packs it and keeps packing it. That's the easiest and cheapest way to keep the road up. Government will send you a pamphlet free about how to make the split-log drag and how to use it."

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"Looks to me, if every feller'd do that the roads would be good everywhere," said the younger of the visitors.

"They would, and a man ought to be ashamed to have a bad road in front of his place—just as much ashamed as to have a run-down, dirty place," said Mr. Weston.

"I think I'll make me one of them things and use it in front of my place," said the eldest man.

"Me, too!" chimed the other visitor.

"Come show us that one you got made; I don't want to lose time writin' for them instructions from Washington," asked the youngest man.

"All right; glad to!" said Mr. Weston.

As the party moved toward the shed where the simple but effective "split-log drag" reposed under the shed Mr. Weston chuckled.

"When I come up there where you fellers were talkin' an' heard you say somethin' about motor-cycles," he said, "it reminded me of a story they tell on Hen Tucker. He never had seen one of the things. He'd been to town an' filled up on some o' that mean blind-tiger booze, an' was a-wabblin' along the road torrards home. It was jest about sundown.

"He zigzagged out in the road in front of an automobile, an' one corner of it hit him,

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spun him aroun' about six times, an' wallowed him in the dust, but the auto kept goin'. Just as he was gettin' up, here come a motor-cycle right up behind. Zip! It slammed him aroun' again an' went flyin' up the road—pop—pop—pop—pop! Hen riz up an' looked at the cloud o' dust an' shook his head.

“‘Danged ef I ever knowed them ortymobiles had young 'uns that follered them that clost; an' to think I been run over by er orty en its calf!' sezze.”

CHAPTER XXVII

SEASONABLE showers fell on the corn crop. Joe kept the soil stirred lightly with a hand-rake so as to conserve the moisture, and applied two hundred pounds of nitrate of soda when the stalks were two-thirds grown.

That gave the crop a strong impetus, and tassels began to show above the dark-green leaves, some of which were almost five inches across. A good soaking rain fell, followed by a cloudy day and a day's drizzle. That night it showered intermittently, and Joe and his father went down about dusk between showers. His father had told him he heard something rustling about in the corn. The idea of a cow or a horse in there working havoc sent a cold chill down Joe's back.

The two stopped at the fence and listened in the dead stillness.

There was a cautious rustling, faint but plain. It was a sort of whispered rustle, that a person could sense more than he could hear.

"Hear that! That's it; some o' them pesky calves in there!" excitedly urged Mr. Weston,

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The sibilant rustle was heard again. In fact, it never seemed to stop. Occasionally there was a louder noise. Joe laughed.

"That's the first time I ever heard corn grow!" he said.

"*Heard* it grow? That's the first I ever heard of that sort of foolishness," snorted his father.

"That's what I said—*heard* it grow. That noise is just the unfolding of the leaves. The rain is furnishing plenty of moisture, and the sap is rushing up, and the leaves are simply opening fast — tassels coming out, and all that."

"I'll believe mighty near anything my son says about corn, but blame my cats if I go that far as to say I *heard* corn grow!" said Mr. Weston, with much distrust in his tone.

"All right, then. What makes that rustling in there?" asked Joe.

"Pesky calf—or—or jay-birds roostin' in it, or—or wind." He ran out of conjectures.

"You know it ain't possible for a calf to be in there, because we been all round the fence; it's tight, and the gate is locked. Now, cut out the calf," suggested Joe.

"Well, how about jay-birds, or wind, or varmints?" asked Mr. Weston, hopefully. He was determined that it should not be unfolding corn leaves that he heard.

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"Did you ever hear of jay-birds roosting in corn—honest, now?" insisted Joe.

"Well, don't know's I ever did."

"All right; jay-birds and calves are out of the question. Do you feel any breeze to rustle the corn?"

"N-no—b'lieve not," said Mr. Weston. He was being hemmed in and knew it. There never was a calmer night—not a breath of air stirring.

"Now the wind is out of the question, too. Listen! Hear that?" They listened again.

"Sounds like the whisperin' in that big sea-shell when you hold it to your ear," said Mr. Weston.

"Ain't a thing in the world except the corn growing—leaves unfolding and rubbing against one another as they open—that makes that noise. So you can say that you've *heard* corn grow, even if you never *saw* it grow," suggested his son.

"Well, live an' learn!" his father responded.

"Hope to goodness we won't have a rain for about two or three weeks," said Joe. "That corn is fine, and if we have a nice, quiet, dry spell and no big wind, the pollen will fall plentiful from the tassels to the silk and the ears will be seeded plumb to the end, good fertile grains. Wet weather just at tasseling-time is bad for

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corn. It is always better if the weather is dry and still."

"I've heard old farmers say that, but they didn't know the reason," said Mr. Weston.

"If there's much wet weather or wind about tasseling-time the pollen from the tassels don't fall on the silk evenly. That is necessary to make a perfect grain. There's a strand of silk for each grain. Unless that strand gets pollen on it, no grain. Rain and wind wash the pollen away before it gets on all the silk."

"That makes nubby corn?" inquired his father. Joe nodded.

If the weather had been ordered especially for the corn it could not have been any finer. It was exactly three weeks until a gentle, slow rain fell one night.

"My crop's made, it's made!" rejoiced Joe, when he arose the next morning. "Grain's all formed; now plenty of moisture to fill 'em out—crop's made, I tell you, and it's going to be a whale of a crop, believe me!"

"Looks like the season come just right," observed his mother.

"Couldn't be better," admitted Joe.

His effort at seed-selection was bearing fruit. He had saved the seed from the stalks with the most ears on them; and in the crop coming on there was at least a third of the crop with

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three perfectly developed ears on each stalk; probably fifty stalks with four well-developed ears, and a half-dozen which showed four good ears and a rudimentary ear which could in time be developed into a perfect ear.

Joe went through and marked all the five-eared stalks with a red-calico string, the four-eared ones with a blue strip, and the three-eared ones with a white piece of cloth.

"I'm going to gather it all separately," he explained to his father. "These few stalks showing the five-ear tendency I am going to plant off by themselves next year and develop them up; same way with the four ears. May plant the two together—I'm not certain now, but I want to breed that corn up to five good ears to the stalk."

"What about this here three-ear corn?" inquired Mr. Weston.

"First I want to get enough of it for you to plant here on the place. Then the rest of it I will sell for seed."

"What about the balance, Joe?"

"Feed the hogs with it."

"Why, Joe," protested Tom Ralston, "you could sell any of this corn for seed-corn at a fancy price, just because it came off this acre. You're foolish not to."

"Well, maybe I'll sort out the best ears from

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the two-ear corn and sell it at a slight advance for the trouble in sorting it out, but I won't take any fancy price for it, because it ain't fancy corn. And I ain't particular anxious to sell it. It's worth as much to us for feed as the money is."

"I think you' ought to be willing to sell it for seed-corn, Joe," said his father. "It's fine, strong corn, better than any of this around here. It's bound to give good results, an' you'll help the farmers that want to get a good corn to plant."

"Oh, well, looking at it that way I reckon it's sort of my duty to let it go. But just wait until I get me a five-ear corn fixed; I'll get five and six dollars a bushel for it right along."

"How you going to carry on corn-breeding if you are off at school?" inquired Tom Ralston.

"Better get the trip to the school first; but if I do go up there pa can do all that's needful next year. Plant on part of this acre the four-ear and five-ear corn; I'll pick the two most perfect ears to get seed from. Then when the ears are matured, do as I have done; pick out the best and strongest stalks with the most ears on 'em and mark 'em. Then the next year I'll carry it on myself."

"What about the rest of that four-ear corn?" inquired Mr. Weston.

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"Sell it at four dollars a bushel for seed after you have got all you want. Same way with the three-ear; sell that at three dollars a bushel."

"This patch in here ought to make a good crop of corn next year," reflected Mr. Weston.

"For goodness' sake, don't plant a stalk of corn in here except that stuff we are trying to breed up. Don't want any other corn any closer than that field below the hill. The pollen of that low-grade corn will get mixed with this fine corn and set us back no telling how far."

"Oh, all right, then. But what shall we plant here?"

"Break it early, and sow cow-pease broadcast, thick as you can. Mix some corn in with 'em, say half and half. When the corn gets almost to tasseling stage mow vines and all off for hay. Break it and turn everything under and drill corn in thick. Let it get high as your head and cut that, too. We'll need lots of provender. Guess it would be a good idea to plant cow-pease along with the second crop, too."

"I was thinkin' of letting the oats mature next spring; we'll be needin' 'em," said his father.

"Well, that's all right; oat-"stubble turned under is a help, and you can get a good crop

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of pea-vine hay and young corn-fodder off here after the oats. I expect that would be the best plan."

"I'll do that, then."

"Won't try truck next spring?" asked Tom.

"No, we'll be short-handed, and it will be all Link an' me can do to keep the stock growin' fast an' get regular crops and such. I'll wait until Joe gets back."

"Say, I've been doing some studying, too," said Tom Ralston, as the three walked back toward the house from the corn-plot. "Father subscribed to a good farm paper for me, and I've been reading it, and I found out about those oak leaves you've been putting on the land. Here's what it says." He pulled a clipping from his pocket.

"Le's see," said Joe, taking the bit of paper and reading it aloud:

"'When leaves are put on the land their chief value is from the humus they supply, and not from the plant-food they contain. One ton of oak leaves, according to Van Slyke, contains fifteen pounds of nitrogen, seven pounds of phosphoric acid, and three pounds of potash. At current prices for plant-foods those in a ton of oak leaves are worth about three-fifty.'"

"Well, I'm glad to know about it," said Mr. Weston.

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"Me, too," said Joe. "I knew in a general way that leaves had some fertilizing value—not very much; but my idea was mainly to get humus—decaying vegetable matter—in the land. I knew it was no account without it, so I just went to piling leaves on."

"Even at three-fifty a ton fertilizing value," said Tom Ralston, "it will not cost that to put the leaves on; and there's the additional benefit to the land in humus, which is more than that sum."

"Anybody would know his daddy was a manufacturer, the way he figgers!" said Mr. Weston, admiringly.

"It's worth knowing," agreed Joe. "This winter I want pa and Link to haul all the leaves they can and bed the cattle in them. The dry leaves will absorb the urine salts and ammonia and droppings. Then put on the ground and plowed under, there is no better manure to be had anywhere."

"I will see that that is done," said Mr. Weston. "Link has got to put in all his spare time on leaves. He's got a younger brother I think I'll hire just as soon as the leaves are off the trees. I'm going to treat that patch o' poor land just beyond yours, Joe. It's so poor it won't hardly grow bitter-weed."

"Well, you know what to do."

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"Sure I do, and we'll do it."

"Think I'll put those two colored boys over home to work on the leaves, too," said Tom Ralston. "Major Dean claimed he had to buy so much commercial fertilizer until there wasn't any more money in farming. He's just farmed that place so long, without giving the soil anything back, that it's wearing out."

"The major sure was a big believer in commercial fertilizer," said Mr. Weston.

"Well, I'm going to see if we can't farm with less of it when I have charge, and a good way is to get a year's start now. I'll have a shed built and give orders that every speck of manure about that lot goes under that shed to protect it from the weather. Then this fall it is to be plowed under, and keep that programme up."

"It will win," said Joe.

"Look here, Joe," said Tom. "If you go off to that agricultural school I'm afraid I'll get all mixed up here. I'm just beginning to learn something."

"Why don't you go if I do?" suggested Joe. "Your father is able to stand the expense."

"I never thought of it; you'll help me get through with things that are too deep for me yet?"

"Sure I will!" assured Joe.

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"I'll write father this very night!" enthusiastically said Tom Ralston.

"Well, where do I come in?" inquired Mr. Weston.

"Oh, I'll write you twice a week of what I learn up there, and send you all the bulletins that are of any value to us down here. I can help a heap that way. Now you can read all right and have got that dictionary to look up any words that bother you, why you can keep up with us right along."

"I promise I'll study faithful," said Mr. Weston. "It's goin' to be powerful lonesome here for me—nobody to talk to about crops an' the cattle at night."

"Good chance for you to get on the inside of this canning business of ma's and lay plans for helping her next summer. You ain't going to have time to worry about being lonesome in."

"N-no, I reckon not," mused Mr. Weston. "In fact, I sorter feel scared at the outlook; there's so blame much to do, with all the stock an' pigs, an' keeping the crops goin', an' you've done a man's share all the time."

"Well, cutting out the truck and the prize corn crop next year will cut down work. Oh, you'll get through all right."

"Yes, I just got ter," said Mr. Weston. "But, Joe, you don't seem like my little boy;

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you an' me has got to be plumb pardners in every way. It was through you I got out o' that rut I was in an' was keepin' you all in; an' you've just gone right ahead, an' I've been keepin' up as best I could, bein' sort o' slow-witted an' shy on education; but I shore will miss you, boy." His eyes were suspiciously moist.

"I'll miss you, too, daddy, miss you like fury. And out of all those best farmers in the world I'll see up there at that school I wouldn't trade one of 'em for my old dad—hear that?"

Mr. Weston brightened and patted his son on the back.

"I know it's goin' to be a big help when you get back, an' we'll learn a whole lot more, but all the same"—he shook his head, doggedly—"it's goin' to be powerful lonesome an' hard to stand."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE summer flew by with incredible swiftness. There came, gradually, gently, a soft haze in the atmosphere; the distant hills were enshrouded in purple. In the woods there were a few first yellow leaves on the gum trees; there was crimson on the sumach bushes along the fence-rows and a glint of golden-rod in the fields and thickets.

The weather was dry, and a faint touch of coolness in the evenings and the whispering rustle of dying grasses stirred by the breeze gave hints of the fast approaching fall. In the corn-fields the leaves on the stalks had withered to dryness, and the ears were bending downward, laden to the full with grain. Thus was seen another wise precaution of Nature to protect the precious kernels. In this way rain and moisture were shed from the ear, instead of running down inside and rotting the corn.

Joe and his father and Tom Ralston made an examination one day in mid-September. They pronounced the grain fully cured and ready to gather.

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"Guess we'd better make arrangements to have some witnesses here, hadn't we?" asked Joe.

"Reckon we had. We'll invite Squire Allen to come over an' make the affydavies. I'll get Bill Tomlinson and Henry Wilson to come an' weigh an' check it," said Mr. Weston. "We'll kill a plenty of chickens an' have a chicken dinner for 'em; get your ma to make a good pot-pie an' fried chicken, an' such."

"That 'll be fine, and you and me and Link and Tom can gather the corn. It will be pretty slow work; remember, there's really four grades of corn in that patch, and we've got to keep 'em all separate," said Joe.

"Well, we'll have to figger it up by weight rather than by measure, then," said Mr. Weston. "The squire has got a pair of steelyards, an' we'll let him do the weighin' so there can't be any question whatever about the total."

"All right, pa; le's ride over this evening and invite 'em for Tuesday?"

"Suits me," said Mr. Weston.

The squire, who was justice of the peace for the township, accepted the invitation, as did the other two. Both of them were men of standing in the community. Mrs. Weston and Annie were in quite a commotion over the preparation of an adequate dinner, and promised to

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have one that would do justice to the occasion.

Bright and early Tuesday, therefore, the jovial squire drove up in his buggy. He was welcomed by Joe and his father. His horse was unhitched and put in the pasture. Two posts, seven feet high, had been sunk in the ground five feet apart near the prize acre, and a beam nailed across the top to swing the scales to. A big box, with four wires adjusted so it could be easily hung on the scales, was ready. The squire took its weight—six pounds, even. Mr. Tomlinson and Mr. Wilson arrived, and they also weighed the box and agreed on the weight, which was noted in the brand-new account-book Joe had furnished to keep the record of weights in.

“My land, Joe, you ain’t goin’ to pull an’ shuck all that corn, are you?” inquired Mr. Tomlinson. “Rest of the Corn Club boys has their acre estimated.”

“I don’t want any estimate; I want to *know*,” replied Joe.

“Four of us are goin’ to work,” said Mr. Weston. “We’ll clean it up heap sooner’n you think.”

“Oh, I ain’t kickin’; just thought you was makin’ a heap of trouble for yourself,” said the visitor.

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Chairs were brought out for the three men, and Joe and his father invaded the acre, going in an orderly and careful way, starting at the first row, up one row and down another, getting the ears from the five-ear stalks. Each gatherer had a sack swung about his neck. In all, there were about three bushels of this corn. They shucked the ears as they pulled. Then it was placed in the box, weighed, and each boxful was recorded in the book.

After the five-ear corn had been gathered and stored in a box at the house, because of its great value, the four-ear corn was tackled. There were some twenty-five bushels of this. As each box was swung on the scales and weighed the number of pounds was set down in the record.

Tom Ralston and Link had arrived by this time, and they were put at work with Joe and his father, gathering the three-ear corn. Something over sixty bushels of this was got, and the bell rang for dinner.

It was a fine, hearty meal, and cooked in the very best of style. Mrs. Weston blushinglly received the compliments of the guests and noted with satisfaction the full justice the men did to the viands set before them.

The guests and the Westons sat on the front porch for a while after dinner while the men smoked their pipes. All three of the visitors,

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practical farmers, were lavish in their praise of the corn.

"If I hadn't 'a' seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't 'a' believed it," observed the squire. "I been hearin' a lot about what these Corn Club boys been doin', but I thought it was mostly talk. But that corn beats anything I ever seen."

Joe had slipped away, and came back with three bundles of three ears each. He presented a bundle to each guest.

"That corn will average four ears to the stalk," he said. "I will build it up to five ears in three more years, but right now there isn't anything in this county that'll touch it. I want you to take it with my compliments and give it a chance. Don't plant it near any other corn, and see for yourself what it will do."

They were profuse in their expressions of pleasure at getting a start of the famous corn, and asked many questions of Joe and his father as to how he managed to get such a tremendous crop from a small piece of land. As they adjourned to the acre Wilson and Tomlinson pulled off their coats.

"You got all that special seed-corn out of there, ain't you, Joe?" asked Mr. Wilson.

"Yes, sir. Why?"

"Well, we got to have some exercise," said

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Tomlinson. "We're so full o' fried chicken an' chicken-pie that if we don't move about we'll go to settin' pretty soon."

"All right, glad to have the help. Pitch in," said Mr. Weston, genially.

They did, and with a will. With six persons pulling and husking, fine progress was made. After it was weighed it was dumped in the wagon-bed, and when the wagon was full it was hauled to a new rat-proof crib and stored. At five o'clock the last ear had been gathered, and the three men retired to the house to add up the totals and reduce the weight to bushels.

Joe went with them and presented his record of expenditures, then returned to the field, where he and Link and Tom and Mr. Weston began gathering up the shucks to be stored for feed and bedding for the cattle in the winter-time. After a while the squire called from the front porch, and beckoned Joe to come there. Joe and his father went up, accompanied by Tom, to hear the verdict.

"Well, Joe," said the squire, "we've been over all this mighty careful. Each man has added it, and agreed on the total. Each man has divided it into bushels, an' our figgers tally. Then we went over the expense an' figgered that out, too, an' applied it pro rata per bushel."

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"Yes, sir," said Joe, a lump in his throat. "What does it make?"

"You've done a plumb ree-markable thing; you've made two hundred an' thirty-three bushels o' corn on that acre!" announced the squire, impressively. "I wouldn't 'a' believed it unless I seen it an' weighed it, but that's what it is. The figgers are right an' the weights are right."

"That's just bully!" said Joe, with glowing eyes. "I did not think it would run that high."

"Beats anything I ever seen!" exclaimed Tomlinson.

"But what about the cost?" inquired Joe, anxiously.

"Well, sir, accordin' to the ree-cords, you've made this here corn at a cost of thirteen and a half cents a bushel!"

Joe threw his hat in the air and gave a yell of joy, in which he was joined by Tom.

"I would have been tickled to death to have done it on from sixteen to twenty!" he exulted. "They can't beat me to save their lives; I've got 'em beat!"

"Looks like it to me!" enthused Mr. Weston.

"Come on in here, now, Joe, an' make the affydavies I writ out to the cost and the ree-cord of work an' all, so there can't be no question about it. I brought my seal with me, an' I'll

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swear you to it. Then this committee will certify to it and swear to the weights an' figgers; we'll attach the ree-cord of weights to the certificate," said the squire.

"Nothin' like doin' things up ship-shape with an affydavvy," solemnly advised Mr. Tomlinson.

"No, we're all powerful proud of what you've done, Joe, an' we don't want no slip-up at the last minute," said Mr. Wilson. "We want our county to take the prize over all of 'em again."

"You goin' in for the prize at the County Fair next week?" inquired the squire, after the papers were all fixed.

"No, sir. I told the boys I would not compete with 'em on yield, because I've had experience. This is the first year for about nine-tenths of 'em."

"That's powerful clever of you," approved Tomlinson.

"Sure is. You could take the prize all right, I reckon," said Mr. Wilson.

"I guess so, but I'll submit a dozen ears in competition for the prize for best dozen ears. I need that twenty-five dollars to go to the State Fair on, where the real big fight will be," said Joe.

"Well, good luck to ye. We've had a fine time to-day, and I guess we've all learned some-

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thin'," said the judge. "I know I have. I'm goin' to try some of this intensive farmin'. If a feller can make one and two hundred bushels to the acre it's better'n scratchin' over so much ground like we do. Yep, I think I've learned somethin' to-day—considerable somethin'," he said, as he shook hands and climbed in his buggy for the homeward trip.

"Me, too," said Tomlinson. "It ain't goin' to be five years till a farmer in this county that makes less than forty bushels to the acre is goin' to be counted a doggone poor farmer an' too shiftless to live—mark what I tell you. We're all havin' our eyes opened."

Tom Ralston stayed to supper, and it was a happy and jubilant party. After supper they began sorting over the corn by lantern-light, to pick out a dozen ears to try for the prize ear competition at the County Fair, and the State Fair, also. By bedtime they had found only three ears that came up to Joe's idea of perfection.

Next day the hunt for fine ears went forward. Two surprisingly fine ones were found among the common run of the corn. During the course of the search every ear had been handled, and the result was about a bushel and a half of beautiful corn.

Then came the work of sorting this down to

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twelve. Joe marked the different varieties with thread of different color tied about the ears after he had selected the dozen. Everything was then in readiness for the County Fair the following week.

Mr. Weston hitched up the team next Monday early. Tom Ralston came along on his pony; Mrs. Weston and Annie were in the wagon, and Link had a place in there, too. The colored boy had worked most faithfully, and was enthused over learning about agriculture, so he was given the trip also.

Joe entered his dozen ears of corn, and it was placed with merely a number on it—no name. The corn expert of the state and the Commissioner of Agriculture and an agent of the federal Department of Agriculture were the judges.

The Corn Club exhibit of the county was good—three times as good as that of the previous year. The best record presented was a hundred and one bushels on an acre. Some of the boys were much disturbed when they found Joe Weston was on the ground, but were reassured when he repeated that he would not compete except for the best dozen ears.

When the prize-winners were announced he got the twenty-five dollars in a walk; no one came near him on it.

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"I doubt if there's another dozen ears in the entire state that can equal them," said the great authority on corn, who did the grading, as he pinned the blue ribbon on the exhibit and handed Joe Weston two ten-dollar gold pieces and a five.

As they drove home that evening Joe was jubilant.

"Pa, you've got to go to the State Fair with me," he commanded.

"Oh, shucks, Joe! I can't spare the money nor the time."

"I'm paying for this; it's my treat, and this twenty-five dollars will see us through in great shape. It will keep you from getting behind the times. I want you to see that fair. We'll spend three days; it's educational."

"What about the work on the place?" began Mr. Weston.

"Nothing to do next week except look after the stock. Link can do that, and I'll hire his father three days out of the money I get for teaching Tom."

"I'm powerful rusty on clo'es," wavered Mr. Weston.

"There'll be such a crowd there nobody will notice your clothes," assured Joe.

"Take your ma an' Annie, instead," said Mr. Weston.

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"We're going to stay right here, now, pa. You ain't had a holiday in I don't know when. I want you to go; we ain't going a step," said his wife.

"Oh, all right, then," succumbed Mr. Weston.

Really he was as excited as Joe was when he was about to take the trip to Washington. He had never been to the state capital, and had never seen a real, sure-enough big fair.

So it was settled that they would leave the following Tuesday on the train which passed the town at eight o'clock, and Tom Ralston was to go with them.

CHAPTER XXIX

JOE, Mr. Weston, and Tom Ralston were ensconsed on the train bound for the fair. It was packed with a jolly crowd of visitors for the same destination.

"Oh, by the way, father will meet us there," said Tom Ralston, joyfully. "I wired him last week we would leave to-day. He said last spring he wanted to see the fair and would try to get down in time, so I heard from him yesterday. He's already there, and has engaged quarters for us at the hotel."

"I'll be mighty glad to see him," said Joe. "And I guess it's a good thing he has rooms for us. I saw in the paper that there was such a crowd in town that all the places were filled up and folks were sleeping in chairs in the hotel lobbies."

"I'm glad he's fixed it, too," said Mr. Weston. "I ain't much on this chair-snoozin'. Every time I go to sleep in my chair it gives me a crick in my neck."

They arrived at the capital city a bit before noon. Streets and stores were gay with banners

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and bunting; bands were parading; and an excited, eager stream of people extended from the depot, where several excursion trains were discharging their loads.

Mr. Ralston was watching for the party, and seized on them at once, shaking hands jubilantly.

"My, my, it's a sight for sore eyes to see you! I've been here a day and a half; and, say, this fair is great! It's a liberal education to see it. I'm coming every year. And such stock! Why, I never saw the like of fine cows—"

"Any muley black ones?" innocently inquired Tom. His father gulped, began to turn red, and grinned sheepishly.

"Now, Tom; now, Tom!" he began, pleadingly.

"I just wanted to know; I think the muley ones are the safest; they can't hook—only butt," said Tom, demurely. Mr. Ralston grinned.

"Yes, I suppose so; and if we ever buy any more cows I'm strong for the muley kind," he said.

"Look here, what's the joke?" demanded Joe Weston.

"Oh, just a little private one between us," said Tom. "I can't give it away yet."

"Come on up to our rooms and wash up. We'll get some dinner first, then go to the fair

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afterward. We can get supper there," suggested Mr. Ralston.

He had got two handsome adjoining rooms, and after the dust of travel had been removed from the new arrivals Mr. Ralston handed Joe the morning paper.

"They are expecting you, Joe," he said. "Big write-up of the Corn Club contest, and you seem to be considered the man they've all got to beat; it's the field against you." Joe saw his name in big type in the headlines.

"I think I've got 'em tied out," he said, confidently, as he showed Mr. Ralston the record.

"Why, gee whiz, you are as certain to win on this showing as we are to go downstairs!" the manufacturer exulted. "That's fine. And I'm going to send Tom along with you, if you don't mind, for a year at that school."

"Suits me all right; it will be just fine!" heartily agreed Joe Weston.

"I looked into the matter of the prize," said Mr. Weston. "That scholarship is wuth five hundred dollars. The fair management got it for less on account of the advertising, but if you want they'll commute it for three hundred dollars cash; that's what they are actually to pay for it, I understand."

"No, sir; if I win I want that scholarship," said Joe.

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"Yes, that's wuth more than the money, by a heap," agreed Mr. Weston.

"All right, let's go down and eat!" suggested their host, and led the way to the crowded dining-room.

The four were seated at a table placed close to another one. At the next table were three men, and one with his back to them was talking. Evidently, from his conversation, he was a County Superintendent of Education from somewhere in the state. He talked in rather a loud voice, and every word of what he said was audible.

"What I am afraid of," said he, "is that Joe Weston, the state champion of last year, will enter." The mention of Joe's name made his party prick up their ears.

"If Joe Weston ain't in it I think my boy will win the prize, and I am dreadfully anxious for him to. I never did have my heart so set on anything," he continued.

"Any special reason?" said one of the men at his table, helping himself to a stalk of celery and munching idly away on it.

"Yes, there is," asserted the school-teacher, earnestly. "The most urgent reasons. You see, this boy I am interested in is only fifteen years old. He's the eldest of four children, all three considerably younger than he is. His

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mother is a widow—been so for four years now. Her husband was a trifling drunkard who mistreated them and died, leaving them absolutely destitute and on the hands of charity. And this boy has been the man of the family ever since.”

“Too bad, too bad!” said the other of the listeners.

“They moved out in the edge of town on this little patch of ground and in a tumble-down cabin. The church ladies helped them out that first year. The mother took in sewing. The children gathered dandelion greens, and pokeberry shoots for salad, and blackberries. The Lord only knows how they got through that first year. Then a good-hearted man gave them a cow, and the ladies gave a few chickens. They sold milk and eggs, and that helped.”

“I don’t reckon anybody could get closer to bed-rock poverty than that,” said the first listener, with a shudder.

“They could not!” asserted the school-teacher. “Then this boy, Henry, he’s been like a father to those children. He works from daylight to dark. He put in a sort of a garden the next year; that helped give a living, and he peddled some vegetables from it, and worked at odd jobs. He’s kept on hauling manure out there on that land and got it pretty rich. There are seven acres in the place.”

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"Why, that's fine!" said one of the men.

"The garden was better the next year, and the cow had a calf, and that promises to be a good cow. They've got more chickens, and make plenty to eat; and he sells more, and those children are able to go to school in winter now, thanks to Henry. And this year he squeezed in three months himself—the first schooling he ever had."

"My, my, what a tough time that boy has had!"

"Indeed, yes; but not a whimper from Henry. He's got the heart of a Roman soldier in him. And, do you know, the old skinflint that owns that place has gone to charging that poor out-cast rent on it?"

"Oh, you don't say—the old rascal!" chorused the two men.

"Fact. Why, that place was in such bad shape a nigger family moved out of it before these folks were dumped there by the Ladies of Charity. That old rascal has given an option on the place for four hundred dollars to a friend of mine. If Henry can buy the place and stop the drain for rent they'll get along fine. Rent ain't much, but a nickel looks as big to them as a cart-wheel."

Mr. Ralston looked at Joe. He was white, and breathing hard, and straining his ears to catch every word.

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"So," continued the school-teacher, "if he wins he can commute this scholarship for three hundred and make nearly another hundred off the corn he sells. I'll personally see that the balance is made up and enough is raised to buy him a good mule and wagon. If he gets the chance he'll actually make and save money there. If he loses on this I believe it will be the last straw. I actually believe it will break his heart—his spirit—and take the fight out of him."

"What's his record?" inquired the other man.

"Two hundred and fifteen bushels at fifteen cents."

"That's wonderful!" said the first listener.

"Well, he's an experienced gardener by now, but it's a fine record. No record filed up to this time equals it, so I say that Joe Weston is the only one I am afraid of. A few have made a few more bushels than Henry has, but the cost was so much greater. Why, guess what that boy did?"

"Can't imagine?"

"He went around town and cleaned out every chicken-house in town to get the guano; he couldn't afford to spend much money on fertilizer! What do you think of that for resource?"

"Just splendid; and I hope the little chap wins!" said the listener, heartily,

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There was very little talk at the table where Joe and his father sat. Nor did Mr. Ralston or Tom seem inclined to break the silence. All had heard the words of the man at the next table, and all seemed depressed and the life gone out of them.

When the meal was finished they went to the fair-grounds and made for the Agricultural Hall, where the Corn Club exhibits were the first thing. It was a magnificent array and showing. The whole party went into ecstasies over it.

A man in the center of the space where the Corn Club exhibit was began shouting something through a megaphone. They stopped and listened.

"All entries for the contest for the state championship of Boys' Corn Club growers will close at three-thirty, positively. No records will be admitted to file after that hour!" he announced.

"Half an hour," remarked Mr. Ralston, looking at his watch and throwing a sidelong glance at Joe.

"Plenty of time yet," said Joe, easily. "Le's go look at the stock."

They walked back to the stock exhibit down by the race-track, a considerable distance from the Agricultural Hall. They were immersed in

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admiring the beauties of fat, splendid cattle on exhibition when Mr. Ralston pulled his watch from his pocket again.

"Great gracious, Joe, the entries will close in five minutes! You've got just about enough time to make it there. Run! Hurry up!" he urged.

"I'm not going to enter," said Joe, quietly.

"*W-h-a-t! Not going to enter?*" gasped his father.

"No, sir; I ain't." He said it determinedly.

"Oh, son, don't act foolish; don't throw away a sure thing like that!" pleaded his father.

"Go on, Joe. You've worked too hard for this. Go in and win!" said Tom Ralston.

"I ain't going to do it," replied Joe, doggedly.

"If I took the prize away from that poor boy taking care of those little half-orphans and helping support his mother, why—why—I never could sleep at night again!"

Mr. Weston moistened his lips, which were dry with excitement, and wiped his brow.

"I—I forgot about him," he said, slowly.

"It means a heap more to him than going to that college means to me—and that's a whole lot, as you know. It means bread and meat and a *chance* for him and those children. We can whirl in and make enough money by year after next for me to go a year. We've

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got a home and our feet on solid ground; those people haven't. I can't do it, folks—I *won't* do it!" Joe was very earnest in what he said.

"That's so, boy; that's so," said Mr. Weston, gently putting his arm about his son's shoulders.

"Just think how much my winning meant to me—to all of us—the first year, and what it led to," continued Joe. "Honest, now, daddy, you wouldn't have me enter?"

"Not for a thousand dollars, poor as we are!" blurted his father. "There's folks poorer than us. We've got our start; we can go ahead. Le's give the other fellow a chance. You're teetotally right, Joe."

Mr. Ralston and Tom stood by in silence. They felt that this was a matter to be settled between father and son, without any outside interference or advice.

"Entries are closed!" remarked Mr. Ralston, in the lull which followed Mr. Weston's speech. Joe gave a long breath.

"I do hope that boy wins!" he said.

"Le's all go see," said Mr. Weston.

There was no need to ask questions. The radiant face of the County Superintendent who had been talking at the hotel was answer enough. Mr. Ralston went up to him.

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"Well, your boy won?" he asked.

"Thank God, yes! It meant everything to that boy, to his mother, to those children!" he said, fervently.

"What's he going to do—take the scholarship or the cash?" inquired Mr. Ralston.

"Oh, he can't go to school; he'll take the three hundred and be glad to get it."

"Come here a minute; I want to talk to you," said Mr. Ralston, in a low voice. They stepped out on the portico of the building.

"All right, sir?" asked the superintendent.

"Is that scholarship his to do as he pleases with?"

"That is correct; yes, sir."

"I'll give you five hundred dollars for it."

The man gasped, and stared at him as though he did not comprehend.

"I mean it; I'm not joking. If your boy can sell that scholarship I will give you five hundred dollars cash for it."

"You've sure bought it!" said the man. "Come on up to the office of the fair management and we'll trade right now!" He did not even wait for his hat.

On arrival there the management confirmed the fact that the scholarship was the property of Henry and could be sold or used as he pleased. The County Superintendent showed a boyish

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scrawl of a note authorizing him to act for Henry.

"He couldn't spare the time to come up here," he said.

Mr. Ralston laid down five one-hundred-dollar bills, took the transfer of ownership and the scholarship certificate and a receipt.

"But—I don't understand why you are doing this; and for whom is it?" queried the superintendent.

For answer, Mr. Ralston tossed over to him the record he had borrowed from Joe Weston. The man glanced at it, and the color left his face a moment.

"Why—why—er—he is really entitled to the prize!" he whispered, apprehensively.

"He would have been—if he had entered," corrected Mr. Ralston.

"But—why didn't he enter. Too late?" said the man.

"No—too big," said Mr. Ralston.

"I don't just understand—" puzzled the superintendent.

"We heard you talking down at the hotel to-day at dinner," said Mr. Ralston. "We were at the table behind you. And Joe was just too big and too fine to take it away from a chap that has had less of a chance than he has,"

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"And who are you?" asked the wondering school-teacher, with a great respect in his voice and manner.

"I'm just a 'rich Yankee,' as you folks down here call us, that likes to do a bit of good once in a while with some of his money," smiled Mr. Ralston, as he left the office.

He found Joe and Tom looking at the Corn Club displays.

"Where you been?" inquired Mr. Weston. "We got lost from you."

"Oh, I've been rambling around some on my own hook," he answered, smilingly.

"Well, I beat 'em out again on the best twelve ears—got forty dollars as a prize for that, anyway!" said Joe, jubilantly, as he pointed to the blue ribbon on his corn and a card placed thereon with his name as winner.

"Want to sell it? I'll give you three dollars an ear for it," queried an enterprising seedsman, bustling up.

"You certainly have bought twelve ears of corn!" said Joe. "Where's the money?"

"Here!" said the man, counting it out. Joe wrote a receipt and an order for the twelve ears to be delivered to him.

"A hundred and one dollars for twelve ears of corn is a sort of record-breaker itself!" said Joe. "County prize, twenty-five dollars; state

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prize, forty dollars; and three dollars an ear for the corn."

"You bet it's a record," said Tom Ralston.

"Come on, let's go to this eating-place and get supper before the crowd rushes in. I'm used to eatin' early," said Mr. Weston.

When the party were seated and the waitress had gone for their order Mr. Ralston looked at Joe intently.

"Got any regrets about losing that scholarship, Joe?" he inquired.

"Not a one, sir; I'd do it again in a minute if I had the chance!" answered Joe, sturdily. "Just think how much it means to those folks, to that boy! Well, they've got their chance now—like I had."

"You've still got yours," said the manufacturer. "I think, Joe, the work you are doing is a good influence in the county and in the state. It has been a help to me, and it is making a fine chap out of Tom."

"Oh yes, I'm going ahead, but it's going to put off my trip a couple of years. I'll have to wait that long to learn some of the fine points of farming—that's all."

"No, it is not going to put it off one day, Joe—not one day. Here's your scholarship; take it as a slight token of the appreciation of one who would do more for you gladly if

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there was any way to do it!" Mr. Ralston handed over the certificate.

"Hooray ter goodness! Is it really so?" inquired Mr. Weston, rising out of his seat.

"It sure is, pa; and I thank you, Mr. Ralston, from the bottom of my heart. Will the poor boy get the money all right?"

"The full price, Joe—five hundred. I did not want you to think you had taken advantage of him for a penny. He got two hundred more than they expected."

"Well, we'll study hard, won't we, Tom, and try and show we are worth it?" said Joe, happily.

"We'll give a good account of ourselves," asserted his chum.

"And, say, I do hope this won't get in the papers and make that poor boy feel that he really didn't win, after all—that it was a sort of a charity scheme, you know?" said Joe, earnestly. "The way a thing comes to a person has a heap to do with the enjoyment."

"I've fixed that," said Mr. Ralston. "It was part of the trade with the superintendent that he would keep his mouth shut; and we won't do any talking, either."

"My, my, but this has turned out fine! Won't mother and Annie be glad?" asked Joe Weston, happily.

THE END



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